Feedback is a key contributor to motivation. The need to be valued is a potent emotional force, and positive feedback fills that need.

—David Sousa, “Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers”

Especially in education, we are always being asked to give people feedback. Teachers give students feedback about their class work. Principals give teachers feedback about their instruction and achievement results. Superintendents give principals feedback about the success results in their schools. Many of these feedback comments could be categorized as judgment statements:

- “I like the way you . . .”
- “You are doing a good job at . . .”
- “I would like you to consider . . .”
- “Have you thought about . . .?”
- “Here is an area of concern . . .”
In this chapter you will learn

- The importance of feedback
- Three types of feedback
- Options to offer meaningful feedback
- How to Coach-on-the-Fly using reflective feedback
- How to structure a conversation about a difficult topic

By learning to give good feedback, you become true partners with your colleagues and build their capacity to be the best educators they can be.

The Importance of Feedback

David Sousa (2009), a consultant in educational neuroscience, suggests that feedback actually fuels learning. In his article “Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers,” Sousa discusses how areas of the brain are more active in subjects who are learning tasks and receiving feedback than in those subjects not receiving feedback. The feedback encouraged the learners and contributed to their motivation. Positive feedback filled the strong emotional need to be valued.

Constructive feedback acts in the same way. When it is timely, specific, and builds on others’ strengths, it is very effective. But feedback is often neglected or given half-heartedly.

David Perkins (2003), author of King Arthur’s Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations, says there is good news and bad news about feedback. “The good news is that feedback is essential for individual, community, and organizational effectiveness and learning. The bad news is that feedback often flops, yielding no meaningful exchange of information and driving people apart” (p. 42). He offers some food for thinking about feedback and the possibilities of new responses for long-standing habits. He suggests there are two components to feedback. One is the content of the feedback—the message or information that you want to share. The other component is the importance and value of the relationship.
Perkins describes three types of feedback in common practice as people try to balance the message with the relationship.

Figure 5.1 Three Types of Feedback

*The Good News:* Feedback is essential for individual, community, and organizational effectiveness and learning.

*The Bad News:* Feedback often flops, yielding no meaningful exchange of information and driving people apart.

**Negative Feedback**

- The lay-it-on-the-line critical feedback
- The most painful type because it tells people straight out what’s wrong
- It is most obvious to give and usually follows a natural avalanche of impulse, such as “That was awful,” “Did you think?”
- People need to know what’s wrong—so why not tell them: “too long,” “boring,” “uninteresting”
- The information can be alienating and over time can provoke defensiveness and negative attitudes
- Negative feedback is worsened when it focuses on a person’s core identity rather than a product or an idea, that is, “It sounded stupid to me,” “Last-minute Lucy, again.”

**Conciliatory Feedback**

- Positive and vague. Avoids criticizing to be supportive and avoid conflict; comes from belief that negative feedback will be rejected and relationship harmed, such as “OK, that will probably work,” “Interesting”
- Often called “social stroking”
- Usually read as pleasant, encouraging, and nonthreatening. Not feedback at all: it’s encouragement and conflict avoidance in the guise of feedback
- Rationale: relationships are so important and feedback is so difficult—chooses relationships over information
- Receiver learns over multiple occasions that the feedback is empty and can be read as evasive or pandering

**Communicative Feedback**

- Clarifies an idea or behavior under consideration (to be sure you are talking about the same thing)
- Communicates positive features toward preserving and building upon them
- Communicates concerns and suggestions toward improvement
- Consumes more time, requires thought and effort
- Read as careful, respectful, and honest

Adapted from David Perkins (2003) *King Arthur’s Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations*
Three Types of Feedback

Figure 5.1 describes three types of feedback. The first type is *negative feedback*. This is the type people often use when they have suggestions to recommend for improvement. It is given (and received) as critical feedback. It is a lay-it-on-the-line message with no sugar coating. It can be very painful because it tells people very directly what is wrong. Negative feedback is at its worst when it is sarcastic or follows judgments about a person’s core self—“Here comes Last Minute Lucy again!” or “That was stupid!”

One may ask, “Why not just tell people straight out what is wrong? It takes too long to ‘dance’ around the issues.” However, information given in this way can be alienating. It most often provokes defensiveness and negative attitudes. The receivers of negative feedback go into protective mode and stop listening. They begin defending themselves almost immediately. Instead of listening to the desired changes, they formulate rebuttals and spend their time justifying what they are currently doing. The message is delivered but the feedback falls on deaf ears.

A second type of feedback is called *conciliatory feedback*. This kind of feedback is positive but vague. It avoids conflict and criticizing in order to appear supportive. It comes from the belief that negative feedback will be rejected and the relationship with the other person will be harmed. Examples include, “Interesting” or “That will probably work.” Conciliatory feedback is read by receivers as pleasant, encouraging, and nonthreatening. But it is not feedback at all. As Perkins says, “It is encouragement and conflict avoidance in the guise of feedback” (2003, p. 44). The speaker is choosing relationship over message in the belief that maintaining the relationship is more important than delivering the message. Over time receivers may learn that the feedback is empty and could begin to read the feedback as superficial or evasive.

The third type of feedback is *communicative feedback*. In Perkins’ words this type of feedback “clarifies the idea or behavior under consideration, communicates positive features worth preserving and builds upon them, and poses concerns
and/or suggestions toward improvement” (2003, p. 46). It may take more time than the other two forms of feedback and certainly requires more thought and effort. However, Perkins notes that it is read by others as honest and respectful.

In the past people have talked about “warm” and “cool” feedback. Warm feedback was saying something positive about the topic. This was followed by cool feedback, which was saying something critical or more distanced. This type of feedback offered language for sharing information. Yet receivers were often confused about the but statement following the positive ones. They either did not clearly hear the but as something to take seriously or they focused too much on it to the exclusion of the strengths listed before it.

**Options for Offering Meaningful Feedback**

David Perkins (2003) suggests a new frame for offering meaningful feedback. He calls it communicative feedback. Instead of using warm and cool feedback, he suggests we offer feedback through the lens of three steps:

1. Clarifying questions or statements
2. Value statements or questions
3. Questions or possibility statements

Let’s look at the feedback document in Figure 5.2.

**Figure 5.2  Steps to Communicative Feedback**

1. Ask clarifying questions for understanding:
   “How do you see this different from . . . ?”
   “How did your students respond to the process?”
   “What are the costs you have calculated to put this in place?”
   “Of your resources you used, which ones would provide the most help to move forward?”

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(Continued)

"Which groups provided useful input to the plan?"
"When you checked alignment with the state tests, what did you find as strengths or gaps?"
"What are you thinking will be a barrier for parents?"

2. Express the value potential specifically:
"The strength of the idea is . . ."
"You have really thought deeply about . . ."
"I see evidence of . . ."
"As a parent and teacher, the idea is very exciting to me because . . ."
"It provides high engagement for students by . . ."
"This could offer value to students by . . ."
"The scaffolding of your design will help others understand . . ."

3. Offer reflective questions or possibilities:
"What are you considering in regard to . . .?"
"I wonder what would happen if . . ."
"I'm wondering if you noticed any gaps in student understanding."
"What other considerations are you thinking about?"
"To align more closely with the state tests, what if . . .?"
"What connections have you made to . . . (other subjects, real world, state testing)?"

Adapted from David Perkins (2003) King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations

Clarifying questions and statements are often used as the first step in giving communicative feedback to others. They get a conversation started.

- They ask for more information from the other person. "How did your students respond to the process?"
- They are often rooted in concepts or ideas about which the speaker is curious. "Which groups provided useful input into the plan?"
- They seek to make underlying assumptions explicit. "How do you see this different from . . .?"
Clarifying statements are also very useful for naming or labeling the topic under discussion. They make the core subject explicit and create an “anticipatory set” for the conversation. For example, “I would like to discuss differentiated instruction in your lesson today.” We will talk more about this later in the chapter.

*Value statements* express the value potential of the person or the topic of discussion.

- They affirm a specific strength observed in the other person. “You have really thought about this deeply.”
- They identify the positive actions that are observed in the situation. “I see evidence of . . .”
- They make explicit the speaker’s bias toward the topic. “It provides high engagement for students by . . .”

*Reflective questions or possibilities* engage the thinking of the other person and request a response.

- They take the spotlight off the speaker and shine it on the other person. “What are you considering in regard to . . .?”
- They push the thinking of the other person to make new connections and see other points of view. “What connections have you made to . . . (other subjects, real world, state testing)?”
- They ask for creative or out-of-the-box thinking. “I wonder what would happen if . . .?”

This kind of feedback is specific and builds on people’s strengths. It assumes positive intent (There is that forming positive presuppositions when speaking powerfully again!). It changes the conversation from the speaker doing all the talking and thinking to a true dialogue between two people. For this reason we call it *reflective feedback* because it reduces potential for defensiveness and engages the other person in deep reflection and possibility thinking. When done well the person giving feedback speaks less than the person to whom the
conversation is addressed. The purpose is to bring forward the thinking of the teacher, to help him better understand his own practices, and become able to intentionally use new practices more strategically.

Examples of reflective feedback might be

- What are your criteria for being a successful student in your class?
- What are indicators that your students are good at critical thinking?
- What were the key factors that made this project successful for students?
- How can you apply something you have done successfully in the past to this situation?
- Why do you like it? What specifically makes it work well?
- Additional examples of reflective feedback are in Appendix B.

Coaching-on-the-Fly

Principals and other leaders can also use these reflective feedback stems individually as frames for responding to interactions during the course of their busy days. We call it Coaching-on-the-Fly. What principal hasn’t had a teacher stop her in the hall and tell her some wonderful story about a just-finished class lesson? The principal doesn’t have time for a full conversation, but she could respond using one of these frames. It might sound like this:

- “I can tell you are very excited about the learning that lesson generated!” (value potential)
  or
- “What did students learn better with this activity than they had with the previous way you taught it?” (clarifying question)
  or
- “What are ways to apply what you have just learned to other content?” (possibility thinking)
Responding to something a person tells you in this way demonstrates thought and concern. It offers something to consider further (personal observation, inference, data, or reflective question) rather than simply giving a judgment—either positive or negative, such as “Good job!” or “Wonderful!”

Feedback Practice

Practice giving feedback and Coaching-on-the-Fly by responding to any of these situations that a colleague may bring to you:

- A problem of low-performing students
- Instruction that did or did not get results
- Strategies for issues of discipline
- Ways to work with difficult students or parents
- Reflections about a past performance at a faculty meeting, professional development session, or parent meeting

Which of the response steps do you use most easily—clarifying questions, value potential, or reflective questions? This knowledge will help you focus your thinking when a colleague asks your opinion. You learn to think about what kind of question to ask rather than how the problem might be solved. Because you want colleagues to come to their own solutions, you focus your energy on framing good questions to ask.

Framing an Important Conversation Using Reflective Feedback

These reflective feedback steps may also be used together to form a frame for starting an important or difficult conversation that you might want to have. The process is shown in Figure 5.3.
Say for instance that you have a good "meat and potatoes" teacher. She is dedicated, resourceful, and straight forward. You have observed in her classroom and would like her to use more teaching strategies that differentiate instruction to better meet the needs of the gifted students in her class. Using reflective feedback as a conversation frame, you would put the three steps together.

1. The first step is to clarify or name what you want to discuss. In this case you are using a clarifying statement.

Example: "Mrs. Barker, today I’d like to talk about differentiated instruction."

There is no guessing or hedging about what the topic is.
2. The second step is to identify the value that you hold for the topic or the value that you see in the other person or both.

Example: “You are a teacher who really wants each of your students to reach their potential and I believe that differentiated instruction is a good tool for that purpose.” Here you acknowledge her commitment to her students and the value you see in differentiated instruction.

3. The third step is to ask a question that opens possibility thinking.

Example: “What are the ways you typically plan for differentiated instruction in your lessons?” This uses a positive presupposition that opens up the conversation for her to respond without being defensive.

What you say to frame the conversation should not take more than one minute. This leaves the majority of the talk time with the teacher. When done well the person giving feedback speaks less than the person to whom the conversation is addressed. Consider the following example:

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Principal Terry has a concern about Caroline, a conscientious technology teacher who has been giving many failing grades to students on their projects. He suspects she has been using grades as a discipline hammer instead of as a tool to assess and give feedback to students about their actual work products. Principal Terry has regular monthly meetings with each of his teachers and during one with Caroline he began the conversation like this. “Caroline, today I would like to talk about what goes into assigning grades in your class (clarifying the topic of discussion). I know that you want students to take your class seriously and create substantive products in their projects (value potential). How do you communicate your high standards to your students? (reflective question)”.

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Over the next 10 minutes, Caroline talked about the criteria she used to grade student projects. She said she was frustrated this year because the students seemed more immature than in previous years. They spent a lot of time goofing off in class and not using class time wisely. They appeared to just throw something together at the last minute to submit for their projects. Many students clearly were not demonstrating the knowledge and skills she expected in her class. Terry asked if there were another way to structure the grading so it did not all happen at the end of a project. Caroline remembered that she had done some projects in the past, especially ones with long timelines in stages. She had established criteria to meet for each stage. Maybe she could work out something like that for even the shorter projects. But then she remembered why she stopped doing it that way: That meant there was a lot more grading on her part.

So Terry asked her if there were other ways she might consider to give students feedback about their projects without it all coming from her. Caroline thought a minute and then said this might be a place for peer reviews. Or maybe she could walk around the room as students worked and do informal “grading” and feedback during class time.

Then Terry asked, “What will be your evidence that this new way of grading in stages is working?” Caroline quickly said, “I’ll know it is working if the projects I receive at the end are better quality than what I currently get. All of these students are capable of getting As and Bs in this class. But instead, many are getting Ds and Fs right now. If I set criteria for each stage of the project and give informal feedback to students along the way, it is worth the extra work to have them really learn what I want them to learn.”

Caroline left the principal’s office with a plan she had designed herself and Principal Terry made a commitment to Caroline to support her in these efforts to find alternative ways to engage and involve students in creating quality work.

Note that in this example Terry did not tell Caroline what to do. He simply set the stage for her to “think out loud” about how she might change her instruction and feedback to possibly get better results with students. He believed she was a capable teacher and gave her support and encouragement to try some new ideas to reach a challenging group of students.
Journal Reflection About an Important Upcoming Conversation

Using a journal, explore the reflective feedback steps to frame an important or difficult conversation you want to have with someone.

- What will be the clarifying step? Will it be a question or a statement?
- What value do you want to identify in the other person or in the topic idea?
- What questions might open possibility thinking or reflection for the other person?

With whom might you practice saying these three steps in less than one minute before you have your "important conversation?" How is this process of reflective feedback different from the usual way you respond? What is the potential of this language of reflective feedback to change and improve communication among staff?

Using the Reflective Feedback Frame to Support Excellence

Note that the format for reflective feedback is also an excellent frame to use for evaluation conferences. It can be used to deliver good feedback as well as "improvement needed" feedback. It uses "coach-like" language to structure the conversation. It stretches teachers' thinking while also acknowledging their individual strengths. It is a very powerful way to frame these conversations—especially with excellent teachers—and generates feelings of confidence and competence on the part of great teachers.
Hilda was an outstanding kindergarten teacher. In her school, in which 75% of the families qualified for free or reduced-price meals, she nurtured young children's curiosity, disciplined with steadiness and warmth, developed academic skills using meaningful connections, and partnered with families to create a positive experience for children's first contact with school. In addition, Hilda was respected by colleagues, a vocal advocate for child-centered education on district committees, and considered a "star" teacher by her principal.

In the past when Principal David had met with Hilda for her evaluation conference, he had recited in glowing details all the things that he had observed about Hilda's teaching and her role as an educational leader—both at the school and for the district. After 15 minutes of reporting Hilda's great qualities as a teacher, the formal document was signed by both and then the rest of the half hour was used for informal chit-chat about school or personal things.

This year David wanted a more substantive exchange to occur during the evaluation conference. He decided to put some of his new coach-like skills to work. He said, "Hilda, over the past year I have been especially interested in your work with children who come with very little school background (clarifying statement). You are able to ignite their energy and learning potential to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills (value potential). What are ways you find to be particularly helpful in creating that teaching 'magic'?” (reflective question). Then he was quiet and for the next 29 minutes, Hilda and he engaged in deep conversation about her educational philosophy, her beliefs about how young children learn, and her reflections about what works in the classroom.

When the conference time was over, Hilda thanked the principal for listening and helping her articulate in her own mind what the reasons were for her success in the classroom. These factors were certainly ideas that would help her in working as a mentor with novice teachers—something she would really love to do someday. Principal David had not assigned Hilda mentor duties in the past for fear of overloading her with outside responsibilities. After this conversation he assured Hilda that she would definitely be assigned a novice to mentor the following school year.
Hilda danced out the principal's door, feeling very competent and confident—not from the observations of her principal, but from the brilliance he had allowed to emerge from her speaking about her practices. The principal gained not only a great mentor from this conversation but also great esteem and appreciation from Hilda about his leadership ability!

Summary

In this chapter you have learned how important giving meaningful feedback is to the learning of others. When you are honest and straightforward with others about addressing important issues and concerns, you earn a reputation of being courageous and skillful in communicating.

You also explored three kinds of feedback and learned some steps for giving feedback in a new, more powerful way. It is important to remember that the gift of good reflective feedback goes both ways. If we model giving good feedback to others, we have to be willing to hear feedback from others about ourselves. While it may be difficult to hear others’ truths about ourselves, there is likely to be a vein of gold worth mining.

Finally, you have looked at how to use the reflective feedback structure as a way to frame important or difficult conversations. By speaking your truth honestly and listening to the truths others share about your behavior, conversations become more authentic and your relationships with people become deeper and more profound. You truly can learn to say what you mean without being mean!