

Mastering the Gift of Giving and Receiving Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is more than just an exchange of words, it's a vital tool for personal and professional growth. Yet, it's a concept many of us struggle with. Why? Because giving feedback can feel confrontational and receiving it can sometimes sting more than we'd like to admit.

Have you ever hesitated to tell someone they could improve because you worried about damaging the relationship? Or maybe you've felt your chest tighten when receiving feedback, even if it was well-intentioned? You're not alone.

The reality is, feedback is often mismanaged, leading to stress, defensiveness, or even conflict. But what if we could approach feedback in a way that feels less like a critique and more like an opportunity? A way that's thoughtful, empathetic, and, most importantly, brain-friendly?

Why feedback feels hard? The neuroscience behind it

Before we dive into tips and strategies, let's take a moment to understand what's happening in our brains when feedback doesn't go well.

Have you heard of the "fight-or-flight" response? This is your brain's ancient survival mechanism kicking into gear. When feedback feels like criticism or a threat, it activates the amygdala, your brain's fear centre. This response triggers a cascade of physical reactions like increased heart rate, stress hormone release, and even a reduction in rational thinking.

Here's what could be happening in the recipient's brain when feedback feels threatening:

- Amygdala activation causes defensiveness and stress.
- Cortisol release impairs memory and decision-making under stress.
- Prefrontal cortex shutdown reduces the ability to process and act on feedback constructively.

But the good news? You can mitigate this response by adopting techniques that create a psychologically safe space, both when giving and receiving feedback.

Tips for giving feedback that's brain-friendly

1. Ask for permission

Imagine this scenario: You're reading an email when someone abruptly criticises your latest project. How does that feel? Probably jarring, right? Asking, "Are you open to feedback?" primes the other person's brain to receive without triggering defensiveness.

A simple, “Can I share some thoughts on X?” or “Can I share some feedback that I think will help your development.” can set the tone for a productive conversation.

2. Be specific and objective

Have you been on the receiving end of feedback like, “You’re always late to meetings”? It’s vague and feels like an attack. Instead, focus on specific, objective behaviours. For example, “I’ve noticed you arrived late to three meetings this month. Could we discuss how to better manage timing?”

3. Use the SBI Model

The Situation-Behaviour-Impact (SBI) Model is a simple yet powerful framework:

Situation: Describe the context (e.g., “At the team meeting last Tuesday..”)

Behaviour: Clearly state the observed behaviour (e.g., “..you interrupted the speaker three times..”)

Impact: Share how it affected you or the team (e.g., “...which made it hard for others to contribute their ideas.”)

This model ensures feedback is clear, actionable, and avoids sounding personal or vague.

4. Skip the feedback sandwich

We’ve all received the classic feedback sandwich—compliment, criticism, compliment. While well-meaning, it can feel disingenuous. Instead, aim for what Kim Scott’s *Radical Candor* (a great read btw) describes as being direct while showing you care. You can deliver tough feedback if you’re clear about your intentions and communicate with empathy.

5. Focus on the future

Feedback often flounders when it gets stuck in the past. Instead of dwelling on mistakes, pivot the conversation towards future solutions. Ask, “How can we approach this differently next time?” to keep it constructive and forward-focused.

How we can gratefully receive feedback and use it to grow.

Now, onto the other side of the feedback coin. Receiving feedback, especially tough feedback, requires its own set of skills.

1. Listen actively

Resist the urge to interrupt or immediately defend yourself. Simply listen. Showing you're attentively engaged, through nodding, eye contact, or saying, "I see what you mean", can make you appear open and willing to grow.

2. Ask clarifying questions

If the feedback feels unclear or incomplete, seek clarification. For example, "Can you give me a specific example of when this happened?" This not only helps you understand better but demonstrates that you value the input.

3. Manage your emotional response

It's okay to feel defensive, that's your brain's natural reaction. But when you notice those feelings rising, take a moment. Pause, breathe, and remind yourself that feedback is a gift, an opportunity to learn and improve. If needed, ask for time to process, saying, "Thank you for the feedback. Can I take some time to reflect and follow up later?"

4. Reflect and act

Feedback is only valuable if you do something with it. Reflect on the points shared, create an action plan, and, if possible, follow up with the person who gave it. For example, saying, "I've implemented your suggestion—what do you think now?" shows you've taken their input seriously.

5. Say "Thank You"

Feedback can be hard for the giver, too. A sincere "thank you" helps normalise the process and encourages a culture where feedback flows freely.

How to normalise asking for feedback

One of the most underrated ways to improve your skills, whether as a leader or a teammate is to normalise asking for feedback. Why wait for unsolicited advice when you can actively seek guidance?

When you ask for feedback regularly, it sends a powerful message:

- You are open to growth and improvement.
- You value others' insights and expertise.



Feedback becomes less intimidating for both parties.

Try asking questions like:

“What’s one thing I could do better in this project?”

“Is there anything that stood out to you that I should keep doing?”

Over time, this creates a feedback-rich culture where growth becomes a shared responsibility.

Feedback is a Skill—Practice It

Giving and receiving feedback doesn’t come naturally to most people, and that’s okay. These skills can be developed with practice and intention. By taking a brain-friendly approach, asking permission, being specific, focusing on the future, and staying calm, we can rewrite our feedback narratives.

If you’re still not sure where to start, here’s a simple mantra to guide you:

Feedback isn’t about pointing out flaws, it’s about highlighting growth potential.

Start small, be empathetic, and remember, it’s not just about what you say, but how you say it. With effort and patience, you’ll create a culture where feedback fuels connection, understanding, and success.

If you believe Odel Solutions can help bridge the gap between your workforce’s potential and your organisational goals, send me a message—I’d love to connect.