EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Experience indicates that feedback is most effective when it has the following characteristics.

1.   **Feedback Should Be Descriptive Not Evaluative Or Judgmental**

Effective feedback includes a description of what feelings someone else's behaviour has aroused in us. When we give descriptive feedback, our intention is to communicate to others what we are experiencing. When we give evaluative or judgmental feedback our intention frequently is to judge the other person, or to present some evaluation of the quality or worth of his or her behaviour.

Examples:

Evaluation/Judgmental Feedback

"You couldn't possibly say that if you'd been listening to what's going on."

Descriptive Feedback

"The way I heard you, I got the impression you were ignoring what I've been saying and that makes me somewhat angry."

2.   **Feedback Should Be Specific Rather Than General**

It is usually not very helpful to be told that you are being emotional or apathetic, irrational or cold, touchy or insensitive. Such characterisations are so general that it doesn't take a very keen observer to make one with a grain of truth in it. While these characteristics are so broad that they may be true, they describe you at such a general and abstract level that the information you get is of no direct or practical use.

Examples:

General Feedback

"What you did was bad for everyone. No one will want to put up with that sort of abuse. We must have really got to you."

Specific Feedback

"What you said sounded to me as though you were bitter and hostile. We must have provoked you but I don't know how."

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3. **Feedback Should Take Into Account The Needs Of The Giver and The Receiver**

Feedback designed only to relieve our own feelings may occasionally be justified in a situation such as that of defending the self from continued hostile or scornful or embarrassing or tormenting or frightening verbal attack.

In general, feedback calculated to relieve one's own feelings fails to be constructive or effective. This is true since such feedback does not take other peoples feelings into account, and thus it tends to (1) be destructive, (2) to cut off or drastically reduce communication, (3) not communicate anything useful to others.

Non-Empathetic Negative Feedback

"That's a helluva way for a man to act. You want sympathy or just to have your way?"

Empathetic Feedback

"You're pretty discouraged, aren't you? Hasn't been too long since I felt like crying. I wonder is you have any ideas about how to whip it?"

4. **Feedback Should Be Directed Toward Behaviour The Receiver Can Reasonably Be Expected To Do Something About**

To be told that you are dominating or retiring, amusing or frustrating, inhibiting behaviour or helpful, may not provide any clue for change. If you feel someone is dominating or trying to dominate the group, then feedback directed to specific modifiable behaviour will provide suggestions to the others as to a desired direction of change.

"If you want to follow your line of thought or understand how you really feel, I believe I could stay with you better if you would make your statements shorter or give me a chance to question when I don't understand."

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5.   **Feedback Should Be Solicited And Welcomed Rather Than Imposed**

If you have reason to believe that your feedback may not be desired, it may be well to test by asking something like: "I'd like to tell you how I feel about what you've been doing; would you like to hear what I have to say?"

At other times, when a person has received considerable feedback on his or her behaviour, it may be appropriate to check with him to see if he wants more. As a general rule, it is desirable to establish a norm then members can say at any time when they do or do not want feedback.

6.   **Feedback Should Be Well Timed**

When feedback is given as soon as possible after the behaviour to which it refers, the person getting the feedback has a chance to recapture what he or she was trying to do.

7.   **Feedback Should Include Checks to Ensure Clarity And Understanding**

Asking the receiver to re-phrase what came through to him or her is one way for checking accuracy. The act of checking provides an opportunity for the receiver to raise questions or to make comments.

8.   **Feedback Should Be Checked With Others**

To help the receiver get impressions from others about behaviour, it is often useful to ask for comparisons.

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1	Describes the behaviour which led to the feedback. "You are finishing my sentences for me."	Uses evaluative/judgmental statements. "You're being rude.", or generalised ones: "You're trying to control the conversation."
2	Comes as soon as appropriate after the behaviour immediately if possible, later if events make that necessary. (Something more going on. You need time to "cool down", the person has other feedback to deal with, etc).	Is delayed, saved up and "dumped". Also know as "gunny sacking" or ambushing. The more time that passes, the "safer" it is to give the feedback. Induces guilt and anger in the receiver, because after time has passed there's usually not much he or she can do about it
3	Is direct from sender to receiver.	Indirect: ricocheted: "Tom, how do you feel when Jim cracks his knuckles?" – also known as "lets you and him fight."
4	Is "owned" by the sender who uses "I messages" and takes responsibility for his or her thoughts, feelings, reactions.	"Ownership" is transferred to "people", "the book", "upper management", "everybody", "we", etc.
5	Includes the sender's real feelings about the behaviour in so far as they are relevant to the feedback. "I get frustrated when I'm trying to make a point and you keep finishing my sentences.	Feelings are concealed, denied, misrepresented, distorted. One way to do this is to "transfer ownership" (see #4). Another way is to smuggle the feelings into the interaction by being sarcastic, sulking, competing to see who's "right", etc. Other indicators: speculations on the receiver's intentions, motivations, or psychological problems. "You're trying to drive me nuts." "You're just trying to see how much you can get away with." "You have a need to get even with the world."
6	Is checked for clarity, to ensure that the receiver fully understands what's being conveyed. "Do you understand what I mean when I say you seem to be sending me a double message?"	Not checked. Sender either assumes clarity or, fairly often, is not interested in whether receiver understands fully. "Stop interrupting me with 'yes buts'!"

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7	Asks relevant questions which seek information (has a problem-solving quality), with the receiver knowing why the information is sought and having a clear sense that the sender does not know the answer.	Asks questions which are really statements. "Do you think I'm going to let you get away with that?", which sound like traps. "How many times have you been late this week?" Experts at the "question game" can easily combine the two. "How do you think that makes me feel?", or "Do you behave that way at home too?"
8	Specifies consequences of the behaviour, present and/or future. "When you finish sentences I get frustrated and want to stop talking with you." "If you keep finishing my sentences I won't want to spend much time talking with you in the future."	Provides vague consequences. "That kind of behaviour is going to get you in trouble." Or specifies no consequences. Substituting instead other kinds of leverage such as "should", "You shouldn't do that."
9	Is solicited, or at least to some extent, desired by the receiver.	Is imposed on the receiver, often for her or his "own good".
10	Refers to behaviours about which the receiver can do something, "I wish you'd stop interrupting me.", if she or he wants to.	Refers to behaviours over which the receiver has little or no control if she or he is to remain authentic. "I wish you'd laugh at my jokes."
11	Takes into account the needs of both sender and receiver; recognises that this is a "process" that it is an interaction in which at any moment, the sender can become the receiver. Sender: "I'm getting frustrated by the fact that often you're not ready to leave when I am." Receiver: "I know that's a problem, but I'm concerned about what seems to be your need to have me always do what you want, when you want."	Is distorted by the sender's needs (usually unconscious or unconsidered) to be safe (not rejected). "Now I don't want you to get angry, but"..., to punish. "Can't you ever do anything right?"..., to win. "Ah-ha, then you admit that you do interrupt me?"..., to be virtuous. "Watch this one!" "I'm going to level with you, be open with you.", etc. In short, most ineffective feedback behaviours come either from the sender not seeing the process as an interaction in which both parties have needs that must be taken into account.

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12	Affirms the receiver's existence and worth by acknowledging his or her "right" to have the reactions she or he has, whatever they may be, and by being willing to work through issues in a game-free way.	Denies or discounts the receiver by using statistics, abstractions, averages; by refusing to accept his/her feelings; "Oh, you're just being paranoid." "Come on, you're overreacting!" "You're not really as angry as you say you are."
13	Acknowledges and, where necessary, makes use of the fact that a process is going on, that it needs to be monitored and sometimes explored and improved. "I'm getting the impression that we're not listening to each other." "I'd like to talk about that and try to do this more effectively."	Either does not value the concept of "process", or does not want to take time to discuss anything other than content. Consequently, does not pay any attention to the process which can result in confusion, wasted time and energy, and lots of ineffective feedback.