



WHITE PAPER

Conquering Feedback

Strategies to Level-Up Workplace Feedback

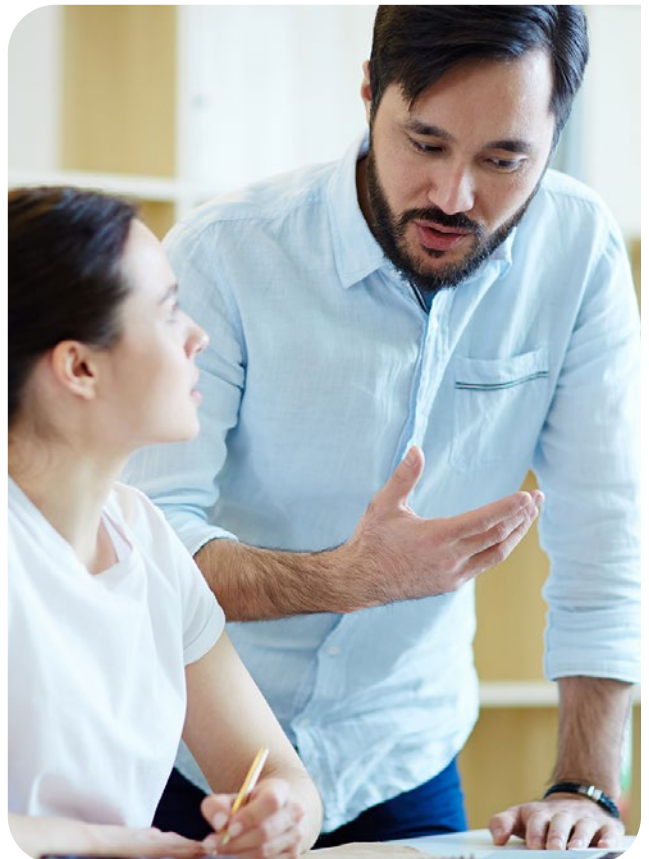


The History of Feedback

Feedback is the process of sharing information about actions, behaviors, and performance to help employees do their best work. It can be negative or positive, formal or informal. It can come during annual performance reviews, passing comments, or one-on-one meetings. **Feedback results in happier employees, better performance, and a healthier workplace culture when done right.**

The term feedback dates back to the Industrial Revolution, a time when technological advances created a need for better work processes, productivity, and quality. Originally used to describe the energy input-output process in mechanical systems, the meaning of feedback has evolved over the years. **Unfortunately, at some point, it took on a negative connotation.**

In the book *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott replaces the term feedback with guidance due to this negative association. Guidance intends to provide advice and share observations or reactions to something. The goal is to be helpful.



Feedback is a communication tool for positive change. It helps:

- Clarify expectations
- Shape appropriate behaviors
- Improve skills and gain knowledge
- Give performance updates and progress toward goals
- Provide an opportunity to be heard and voice concerns
- Form and activate growth plans

Research shows that the benefits of embracing feedback include:

- Increased self-esteem
- Job advancement and growth
- Higher rate of job satisfaction
- Greater creativity
- Faster adaptation in a new role
- Lower turnover
- Improved employee performance
- More motivated staff
- Increased productivity



3 Types of Feedback

It is not uncommon for the receiver to want one kind of feedback while the giver provides another. **You can prevent this from happening by understanding the type of feedback you want.** Are you looking for appreciation (“thank you”), coaching (“here’s a better way to do it”), or an evaluation of recent work (“here’s where you stand”)?

Appreciation Feedback

Appreciation feedback is more than saying thank you. **It’s a way to acknowledge contributions or celebrate achievements and success.** This show of gratitude says, “I know how hard you’re working,” and motivates people to do their best work. The feedback must be authentic, honest, and unique to that person. It needs to be specific. Explain what they did right, why it works, and how it benefits the team or company. When done this way, you establish trust—a critical ingredient in useful feedback.

Coaching Feedback

Coaching feedback involves teaching, providing counsel, sharing insight and recommendations to help someone learn, grow, or change. **The goal is helping people to improve their skills, expand knowledge, boost expertise, address feelings, a difference in opinion, or friction in the relationship.** It is a process to improve performance by highlighting growth opportunities to take people to the next level.

Evaluation Feedback

Evaluation feedback is an assessment, measurement, or rating. **It lets you know where you stand, what it means, where to focus, and what to do next.** The best example of evaluation feedback is a performance review. It’s where you set expectations, map out goals, monitor progress, and celebrate achievements.

You Need All Three

Each form of feedback fulfills different needs. Evaluation for understanding expectations and knowing where you stand, coaching for your growth and development, and appreciation to feel like your work has meaning and adds value.

Trust and Psychological Safety

What makes the team great? According to a study by Google's People Operations team, the highest performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety.

When team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other they:

- Speak freely without feeling insecure or embarrassed
- Know they can count on each other
- Have clear goals
- Believe their work matters

For feedback to be useful, recipients need this sense of safety, but they also must have trust in the leaders providing it. In her TEDx talk, Amy Edmondson, an organizational behavioral scientist at Harvard who coined the term “team psychological safety,” shares three things you can do to cultivate a psychologically safe team:

1. Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem.
2. Acknowledge your fallibility.
3. Model curiosity and ask lots of questions.

However, trust is a crucial component. Paul Santagata, Google's head of industry, puts it best, telling *Harvard Business Review*, “There's no team without trust.”

So, what is trust?

In *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, Stephen Covey defines trust, writing: “Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust—distrust—is suspicion. When you trust people, you have confidence in them—in their integrity and their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them—of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities, or their track record. It's that simple.”

With a trusting and secure team environment in place, it's time to focus on getting in the right mindset for feedback.



Growth Mindset:

An Open Mind for Feedback

Carol Dweck, Ph.D., a Stanford psychology professor who spent three decades researching the growth mindset, shows that people with a growth mindset do three things:

1. Handle feedback more openly.
2. See themselves as ever-evolving and growing.
3. View failure as an opportunity to grow and learn instead of a defining label.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

As you can see in the two mindsets infographic based on Carol Dweck's research, a growth mindset leads to a desire to learn while a fixed mindset leads to a desire to look smart. **These mindsets impact your response to challenges, obstacles, effort, criticism, and others' success.** Below are the critical differences between a fixed and growth mindset.

Fixed Mindset Tendencies				
Avoid	Give up easily	See effort as useless	Ignore useful negative feedback	Feel threatened by it
Challenges	Obstacles	Effort	Criticism	Success of others
Embrace	Persist in the face of setbacks	See efforts as the path to success	Learn from criticism	Find lessons and inspiration from it
Growth Mindset Tendencies				

The Psychology of Feedback

Why do so many tend to shut down when we feel threatened? As its most basic function, the human brain is programmed to minimize danger and maximize reward. Thousands of years ago, this fight, flight, or freeze response was vital for keeping humans alive and safe.

Today, neuroscience research shows that you respond to interpersonal situations (like giving or receiving feedback) the same way you do to a threat. **Understanding how the brain works and reacts to the world around you will help you deliver effective feedback.**

Understanding the Threat Response

When your brain perceives a threat (even on an unconscious level), you immediately move to a fight, flight, or freeze response. You become distracted, stressed, and unable to think clearly. This instinctive response is the reason for strong emotional reactions to feedback.

It's vital that the feedback you give doesn't trigger a threat response in someone else, or you risk shutting them down, rendering them unable to hear what you have to say.

Minimize Perceived Threats and Maximize Positive with The SCARF Model

David Rock, an executive coach, developed the SCARF model to identify dynamics most likely to trigger a threat response. SCARF stands for the five key areas that influence our behavior in social situations:

Status – Your relative importance to others

Certainty – Your ability to predict the future

Autonomy – Your sense of control over events

Relatedness – How safe you feel with others

Fairness – How fair you perceive the exchanges between people to be

Being aware of the psychology behind, and the dynamics that can trigger, a threat response are critical for giving and receiving feedback.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

The art of feedback—both giving and receiving—requires a specific skill set most of us don't inherently have. A successful feedback session requires diplomacy, empathy, effective communication, active listening, and self-awareness on both sides of the conversation.

The ability to give and receive positive and negative feedback is a fundamental skill everyone needs to develop. It is especially important in the workplace.

How to Give Effective Feedback

Whether in the form of an annual performance review or an informal chat, feedback sessions can rattle even the most seasoned leaders. People bring a range of communication styles, expectations, and attitudes to these discussions, leading to disconnect and defensiveness. While these are natural human tendencies, they're also obstacles that make it challenging to achieve desired outcomes.



The fear that you are being mean, won't be liked, or feeling unqualified, can prevent you from providing feedback. In, *Radical Candor*, Scott states, "It's not mean, it's clear."

What ends up being mean is getting to a place where you need to give a low-performance rating or, worse yet, fire the person for performance when they had no idea they weren't meeting expectations. Because you feared their emotional reaction, you never gave them feedback, denying them the chance to improve and grow.

Thinking through your approach will help you overcome your fears and pave the way to effective feedback sessions.

Here are some things to help you plan:

- Create a consistent format for giving feedback.
- Ask others how your style is working and adjust as needed.
- Check in on your emotional state and be aware of others.
- Identify the type of feedback needed: Is it appreciation, coaching, or evaluation?
- Reflect on what makes a successful feedback session.
 - What are your objectives?
 - What message do you want to get across?



Planning

If regular feedback is new for you, the first step is to let people know that you plan to give feedback more regularly. Make the transition to providing regular feedback as the norm in your leadership role.

Timing

How often should you provide feedback?

Feedback should be ongoing, not just once a year, during a performance review. Studies vary on how often it should occur; Gallup research indicates that engagement is highest with weekly feedback. Professor Brené Brown says that a lack of frequent, meaningful feedback is the number one reason talented people say they've left their organizations.

Don't delay providing feedback. There's a correlation between the speed at which somebody receives feedback and the importance they place on it. When you delay feedback, you delay the value you're putting on it. Immediacy matters.

Waiting and giving feedback for the first time in a performance review is the greatest disservice we can do to our employees. **Timely, regular, thoughtful feedback has the potential to change behavior and, ultimately, performance.** As you get more comfortable with running a feedback conversation, the process will feel more natural, and the easier it will be to give regular feedback.

Delivering Negative Feedback

Feedback isn't always negative, but when it is, those conversations can be difficult. Two surveys of 8,000 managers conducted by Zenger Folkman, a leadership development consultancy, found **most managers tended to avoid giving negative feedback; 44 percent described doing so as a stressful experience.** But navigating those difficult conversations can be easier if you focus on the future and exercise emotional control.

When giving feedback:

- Ask the person how they felt something went. This question helps build rapport, limits the threat response, and allows you to assess their self-awareness of the situation.
- Be specific and straightforward about what you can see and hear.
- Deliver the message in a future-focused and optimistic manner.
- Keep it focused on a few things. Choose 2 or 3 areas as takeaways—any more, and you risk the receiver forgetting some or diluting the importance of each one.
- Ask open-ended questions to create a meaningful dialogue.



Here are some helpful phrases you can try:

"I'm saying this because I believe in you and what you're capable of..."

"I'm giving you this feedback because I want you to succeed..."

"How can I help you achieve this goal?" or "What do you need from me to help you be successful?"

For event-specific feedback, try, "Let's catch up to talk about the presentation today. When is a good time for you?" This signals an immediate need to talk about a specific topic and helps the receiver pick a time to talk, which increases the likelihood that they'll be in the right headspace, ready to listen and learn.



Looking Forward

Focusing too much on the past, especially on rehashing past failures or wishing outcomes could have been different, increases tension and causes discussions to turn to blame. Instead, mention the trait you'd like to improve, then shift the focus toward the future.

Ask these questions: **"What can you do to progress from here?"** and **"How can I support your change?"**

Feedback Delivery Methods and Tips

No matter what type of feedback you need to relay, there's a way to get it across so there are no mixed messages. **The Situation, Behavior, Impact, Expectations (SBIE) feedback tool will help you deliver more effective feedback** that will not only benefit your team members but you, too.

Situation

First, define the where and when of the event. Choosing a specific instance prevents the "You always do such-and-such" type of negative feedback.

"During this morning's team meeting, when you presented your quarterly report..."

Behavior

This is where you will describe the particular behaviors you want to address. It's important not to make assumptions about why the behavior happened or give subjective judgments about them, as you may be wrong, which will undermine what you're saying.

"During this morning's team meeting, when you presented your quarterly report, **you gave detailed information, and you answered everyone's questions thoughtfully and thoroughly.**"

Impact

What was the specific impact of the behavior you just described? It may help to use "I" statements here.

"During this morning's team meeting, when you presented your quarterly report, you gave detailed information, and you answered everyone's questions thoughtfully and thoroughly. **I learned a new way to think about our figures, and I think the rest of the department did too.**"

Expectations

To ensure you're focusing on the future, a critical component of feedback, ask something that encourages the behavior to continue or discourages it from happening again if the input is negative.

"During this morning's team meeting, when you presented your quarterly report, you gave detailed information that went above and beyond, and you answered everyone's questions thoughtfully and thoroughly. I learned a new way to think about our figures, and I think the rest of the department did too. **In the future, how might you replicate these kinds of results?**"

The Dos and Don'ts of Feedback

There is always room for improving how to relay information, no matter how much experience you have coaching team members. Let's delve into some dos and don'ts of feedback delivery along with some quick tips for personalizing the messages you send.

Do:

- Judge the actions
- Provide feedback on what you have observed
- Focus on one behavior or trait at a time, so nothing gets lost
- Speak precisely about one incident
- Give the benefit of the doubt
- Include solutions to help them learn
- Use kindness and empathy

Don't:

- Judge the individual
- Speak for others or give feedback on hearsay
- Sandwich negative feedback in between two slices of positive feedback
- Exaggerate, use generalities, or use extremes like "always" or "never"
- Assume motives
- Include threats like insinuating a person's position is in jeopardy
- Use humor or sarcasm

5 Tips for Personalizing Feedback:

Know what your team member's career goals are.

That way, you can frame any criticism as helping them get where they want to go.

Tie the feedback to the organization's goals.

This encourages the listener to hear the feedback as objective rather than personal.

Play up their strengths.

This allows you to acknowledge the whole person, not just individual weaknesses.

Ask them to repeat the message back to you.

What you said and what the other person heard may not be the same thing.

Keep preferences out of it.

Does your feedback reflect the requirements of the job or your personal preference for how to do it?

How to Receive Feedback Effectively

Receiving feedback—good or bad, right or wrong, caring or callous—is stressful. You may feel misunderstood, judged, or threatened. Receiving feedback can put us at a crossroads between our desire to learn and our desire to be accepted and respected.

When you are open to receiving feedback, you learn more about:

- Your strengths
- How others perceive you
- What you need to focus on to continue personal growth

To figure out these answers requires you to master the skill of [actively listening](#).



Active Listening

Active listening is the ability to focus on what's being said to you entirely. You need to hear and understand the message and ultimately be able to respond thoughtfully. We often utilize passive listening, hearing what is said but not listening to retain the message delivered.

Our brains are so busy formulating a response to the feedback that we miss at least half of the message.

Asking for Feedback

If you are feeling underappreciated or undervalued, it may be time to ask for some feedback.

You could start by asking, **"How am I doing?"** However, the problem with this is you will often get a generic response—"You're doing great." Instead, start your request by asking something specific like **"What do you see as my strengths on this team? How am I contributing to the project?"**

Here are some tips for better listening:

- **Recap and validate what you heard them say** with something like, "So what I heard you say is..." or "Let me say that back to you..." or "Are you saying...?"
- **Know that feedback is relative.** Just because someone tells you something constructive doesn't mean everything you do is terrible.
- **Listen to the message and hear what the person is telling you** rather than listening to rebut the feedback.
- **Give yourself a few seconds to think about it** and process what you heard. Then you can move forward with your reaction and response.

Actively listening to feedback gives you the opportunity to reflect on what was said and choose how to respond.

Bringing It All Into Practice

From formal performance reviews to quick 1:1 sessions, giving and receiving good feedback is essential to individual, team, and company success. To help you build a healthy feedback culture, [HSI](#) offers multiple learning opportunities for leaders and employees through:

High-impact microlearning: Upskill your employees around feedback, communication, building trust, and more with modern, consumable learning that inspires self-reflection and growth. Our flexible delivery options allows you to plug our lessons in wherever your people learn.

Live webcasts: Moderated by HSI and tailored for your company, our interactive webcasts offer actionable takeaways to help your people give and receive inspirational, actionable feedback.

Ready to learn more? [Request a consultation today!](#)



About HSI



HSI is your single-source partner for EHS, Compliance, and Professional Development solutions. HSI provides integrated e-learning content, training solutions, and cloud-based software designed to enable your business to improve safety, operations, and employee development. Across all industries, HSI helps safety managers, and technical employees, human resources, first responders, and operational leaders train and develop their workforce, keep workers safe, and meet regulatory and operational compliance requirements. HSI's focus is on training, software, and services for safety and compliance, workforce development, industrial skills, and emergency care. HSI is a unique partner that offers a suite of cloud-based software solutions including learning management, safety management, chemical SDS management, and more, integrated with content and training so businesses can not only monitor and manage multiple workflows in one system, but train employees via one partner.

For more information, visit [hsi.com](https://www.hsi.com)