

How to Deliver Great Feedback

Here is what we covered in a webinar held in February 2018. This is the full transcript of a 40 minute webinar so it is much longer than our usual fact sheets and newsletters. [Click here](#) to listen to the recording.

My aim here is to show that to give good feedback depends on a number of things:

- Defining what it is
- Understanding the challenges that can hamper good feedback
- What you can do to prepare to give great feedback.

Giving great feedback means achieving what you want it to achieve, and that it goes well for both you and the person receiving that feedback.

So let's look at feedback. The first thing is **what** we're going to talk about, **why** we give feedback and **when** we give feedback. I thought it would be helpful to define what I mean by feedback. There are lots of dictionary definitions. You can look on the internet and find all sorts of definitions about what feedback means to people. The dictionary says things like, it's the return of the sound from an amplifier giving a squeaky noise. We're not talking about that sort of feedback! What I found is the best definition of what, for me, is good feedback, is:

"Information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc., which is used as a basis for improvement."

Why do I like this definition? It talks about 'information'. For me, that's what feedback is about. We'll come back to that in more detail in terms of the preparation. It's about the facts about the situation, about the reaction and not just the reaction itself. It talks about 'performance', performance of a task, again, based on what someone is doing or not doing, and the basis for improvement.

What I think really sticks out for me on this definition is that it doesn't talk about good feedback, bad, poor, about being critical – it talks about a basis for improvement. That, for me, is part of the definition of good feedback. It's about making something as good as it can be, and sometimes that's asking tricky questions, or going into more detail, and maybe looking for negatives to make sure you are doing what you can do to make sure your performance or your product is good, but it can be better and as good as it can be.

That's the '**what**'. For the '**why**', why do we need to give good feedback? Well, it's pretty much fundamental to the running of the business. If you're managing people, whether that's one person or 20, 30 or more people, it's more than likely that you're going to have some sort of system of meeting with them and talking with them, whether that's appraisals every six or twelve months, maybe regular one-to-ones, which are gaining more in popularity, but also, even if it's none of those, you should be talking to people at some point in terms of setting goals, talking about how they're doing, getting feedback from them in terms of even just the basic stuff, like if the tea bags have run out, or 'When do I get my new computer?'

Why we need to be good at giving feedback, is fundamental to the day to day operation of your organisation and managing people.

Then we come to the question of '**when**'. Keep in mind that a fundamental of giving good feedback is timing. You can save it for various different occasions – one to ones or appraisals – and that really depends on the

severity of the particular issue, or actually it's not as urgent as you might think, so if it's something that's part of a regular on-going development perhaps it can be saved for a regular six-month appraisal. But if it's something to do with day to day operations, a task coming up, a project coming up, timing-wise it may be better to do it in a regular one-to-one or a meet-up that you have.

Of course, there are potentially those other occasions where there's a one-off incident, when waiting either for a one-to-one or an appraisal is probably not the right thing to do. That could be something like a sudden health issue of the individual, or some sort of disciplinary matter that comes up.

In terms of giving great feedback, what we need to do is to define what that feedback looks like, and in terms of what we're going to be talking about and developing today is that taking an opportunity to improve performance or behaviour, and thinking about it in terms of taking the good and making it better, the best it can be.

We've looked at What, Why and When. What we're going to look at now is a couple of challenges. I think that key to giving great feedback is understanding the challenges in doing it well.

† Challenges – Part One

In terms of feedback challenges, the first one is **Positive Myths**.

These come out of the history of training, mainly around appraisals. I don't know if it's similar for yourselves, but I was always told that when developing appraisals and when training for appraisals, there are a couple of elements – making an appraisal should not be a surprise, and something called the 'praise sandwich'.

We were always told that you shouldn't have anything in appraisals that are a surprise or particularly negative – those things should have been dealt with beforehand. Also, if you're going to tackle something negative in the appraisal, use what they used to term as the 'praise sandwich'. That, for my definition, is you talk about a good element, then you talk about a not so good element, and then you sandwich it with a good element.

I've noticed over the years that there are a couple of problems with these. The first one – nothing in an appraisal is a surprise – gives us an excuse to soften or prevaricate essentially dealing with what might be challenging feedback. Then what tends to happen is that we don't tackle it at all.

Again, those are the situations; easy when feedback is good, less easy to do when it's maybe not seen as being as good. Then, even if there is something that's not as good, we need to 'praise sandwich' – the good, the bad, the good. What I've tended to find is that the challenge with those is that people see the two 'goods' and they think they're up on the deal, and don't really acknowledge the bad. Also, because we try to be nice to people, we sometimes soften what the bad is. Even with the less good, people think, "Well okay, that's alright, but actually it's not a problem because I had that good thing afterwards. It can't be that much of an issue because I'm still a good employee."

If we think back to that definition, the basis of improvement, if we are prevaricating or softening what might be difficult feedback, we might not be giving great feedback because we're not thinking around what may be given to analyse and maybe tackle what could be a negative that could lead to good being even better.

The next challenge is what I've come to see as organisations developing a process for giving feedback which becomes **Criticism in Disguise**.

If I were to say to you now, "Before we spend some time together, can I give you some feedback?" I wonder what your response would be. On a lot of occasions when I've asked that question, people say, "Well, my

stomach drops and I think that someone's just wanting to book time with me so that they can tell me what I'm doing wrong." That's what I mean by 'criticism in disguise'. Having feedback or a one-to-one session that is only ever used to raise negatives means that in people's minds those 'feedback' meetings are, in fact, criticisms in disguise.

When thinking about creating regular sessions of one-to-ones, you need to make sure that that's not happening in your organisation. When you talk about feedback, people might understand that it is a critical analysis of what they're doing, but it is not a criticism of them, and the only time you're ever going to talk to them is to be critical. It's about making sure that those regular one-to-ones take place and cover all the elements.

The next element of challenges in part one is what I call **Criticism versus Critique**.

It might just sound like semantics, but for me it's quite important. Again, coming back to definitions of words. If you look up the definition of 'criticism' in the dictionary it'll list things like: fault finding, disapproval, disparagement. What awful words! But if you look at something like 'critique', it talks about: evaluation, assessment, analysis, appreciation. I want to keep those definitions in mind and introduce a concept that you may have come across – it's the idea of being a critical friend. It's a phrase that's gathered popularity over recent years.

For me, it probably should be (a bit of a tongue-twister) a critiqueical friend, although that sounds a bit too pretentious! It's the same idea. In terms of being a friend who tells us when something, or when there's stuff we need to know that we're not aware of, but other people might be aware of and are talking about behind our backs.

In terms of taking on that challenge of feedback – and I'm talking about feedback now that may appear to be more critical, or more negative, or being less good at something and people are talking about it – you're acting as a good friend if you are taking the view that that individual needs to know about it, because it's not nice or fair that other people are talking about what they're failing to do, and they're in blissful ignorance about it.

A friend tries to help. That's what it means by 'critical friend'. In this situation, when you're thinking about giving feedback, it's not being critical to do just the fault finding or to show disapproval, it's about critical in terms of more 'critique' that you're looking to evaluate, to assess or appreciate what somebody is doing, why they might be doing it, even if that might be leading to particular issues or problems. What's behind that?

There's a word – analysis – that we'll come to in terms of thinking of preparing for challenging feedback.

One thing to note about being a critical friend is that is it – you are their friend. Please note that you're not their nanny! If feedback is challenging because there's a tricky problem, it is not for you to resolve everybody's issues in their lives if they are an employee. You're there to support, help, develop. Again, going back to the definition, to help them with improvements, to make the good and even the bad as better as it can be. You're not there to work out everybody's personal problems for them.

Keep in mind 'critical friend' – great concept, but it's more the thinking of 'critique': evaluation, assessment, analysis and appreciation.

🔗 Challenges – Part Two

Over the years, I've established that unsurprisingly it's easy to give good feedback. It's not really a problem to organise those conversations and have those meetings when you want to talk about what's going well. But of course, the less good is always a bit tricky. As we established early on, feedback, both good and less good, is fundamental to effective operations.

Hopefully, you have an ideal environment where you have regular appraisals or, even better, regular one-to-one meetings, and you've got the concept of being the 'critiqueical friend', having an honest two-way discussion with somebody, and you're not saving up the negatives, or you're not softening it by having the praise sandwich. You're having meetings so that people don't dread the 'f' word – feedback!

If we've done that, we should just be able to get on and do it, right? Well, maybe not quite. What I've found in organisations when I've been brought in to help with problems, the classic situation is: What does the individual say when you've had a conversation about the issues you want to raise with them? Quite often, I find that the feedback hasn't been raised with the individual because of various reasons of prevarication. Over the years, I've thought why is that? What makes it so difficult in terms of giving feedback, particularly the more challenging feedback when that gets in the way of giving good feedback.

In my experience, there are a couple of elements that are fundamental to all of us that we maybe don't think consciously about. The first of those is what I call **Social Niceties**.

We're all brought up as nice, polite individuals. As children, we're told not to point things out, like that person's a bit fat, or that's a funny hat, or why does that person's hair look so funny. We're shushed and told that we can't say that, got to be polite! For those of you from my generation, one of the things I tend to blame is Thumper's dad, as in Thumper the Disney character, remember, in Bambi? For those of you who don't know, Thumper is regularly admonished by his mum telling him, "What did your father tell you?" And it tends to be, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all!"

We have this social nicety situation where we're told not to upset people, we're told not to be rude, not to point things out that might upset other people, and there's the phrase, 'Manners Maketh Man'. But also, in terms of giving feedback, manners maketh an excuse to not actually bring up anything negative or potentially critical or critiquing feedback.

So, we need to think about being this critical friend, and part of that is getting over the hump of being a nice, polite individual. That doesn't mean to say you start being rude and throwing politeness out of the window! It comes back to focusing on the idea that what you're doing, even though it might feel uncomfortable – and if it's difficult feedback it might seem that you're anticipating that it might be upsetting for that individual to hear what you want to say – don't use it as an excuse not to say anything at all, because that will only lead to longer term problems and issues. You need to be that critiqueical friend, and make it easier to deal with raising that issue with them.

That's social niceties. Think about blaming Thumper's dad, but also, it's not the best way to be Thumper, in terms of if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. You do, in some situations, have to say stuff that's tricky or a bit more challenging.

The next one that we don't often think about is our own **Physiology**.

If we think about how we feel when we're faced with a difficult situation, scientists have established that when facing situations that cause us to maybe be a little fearful or anxious, we are then at the mercy of the physical responses in our bodies. Whilst we may not be fearful of giving challenging feedback, we un-tune

them. We can become fearful or anxious when we think about having to put ourselves into a situation where we anticipate it may cause someone else to be a bit upset, even angry, shocked, taken aback, because it's something they hadn't realised before. When we feel that anxiety, there's a range of physical changes that involuntarily occur in our bodies – our circulation increases the blood supply to the brain, our heart beats quicker, and our adrenal glands release adrenalin to fuel what is the classic 'fight or flight' response. On top of that, our salivary glands can restrict and cause a dry mouth, our digestion can slow down or stop and make you feel a bit nauseous, so it's hardly surprising that we may want to avoid the situation that makes us feel bad.

But we can't, particularly if we should give that challenging feedback. What we have to be conscious of is the prospect of giving challenging feedback delivers this double whammy of the physiology making us not feel so good, and social niceties making us feel that we're being discourteous to somebody. What you need to keep in mind is that if you're feeling uncomfortable, the prospect of talking to someone that has triggered this 'flight or freeze' response, it's not because you're weak or fearful. It's because you have the emotional awareness to put yourself into another person's shoes, and you can really understand how they might feel. You're anxious that it's not going to be an easy or enjoyable experience. That's okay. It means you're normal! You have a soul. You're thinking about that individual.

What it does mean, when thinking about and planning for giving great feedback, think consciously about those sociable niceties, and think consciously about the physiology. Don't try to ignore it or be annoyed at yourself for having it – it means you're a human being! That's a good thing!

Looking at those particular challenges, we've got some leg-work before we get to how we go about giving great feedback. We've gone from then, thinking about all those elements, to what are the fundamentals around planning for giving good feedback?

Feedback Fundamentals

There are some fundamentals that I'd like to run through with you now. The first one I've called:

1. Set out Your Stall

You're acting as coach with your team. What you need to do when you're having your one-to-ones is to keep reinforcing your definition of feedback. Going back to the definitions that I gave earlier, it's about that basis for improvement, looking to take the good and making it even better. Make sure that you stick to that as part of your one-to-one appraisals, and live your values in that respect. Part of that is also being prepared to get feedback back from your team member. You're asking them to critique you and what you're doing to making sure that you are offering them the support, to make sure that whatever they are doing, what they are delivering, is as best as it can be.

The second fundamental is:

2. Timely

A bit tricky to define. If you're already having one-to-ones, it really does help because then you're having regular opportunities to meet these people. So if there's something that's relatively minor that you've picked up on, you've got that facility and that regular occasion to do it. You're not having to leave it for six or 12 months for a regular appraisal. What you should be thinking of is it should be soon enough to be fresh in somebody's mind, but not so hurried that you've not been able to fully prepare to go into the meeting and have a conversation.

For one off minor incidents, the one-to-ones are appropriate. For more serious situations and one-offs, it's as soon as possible, but with that caveat of adequate preparation.

The next fundamental is what I touched on before:

3. Two Way

If you're going to give critique, you should be prepared to be critiqued back. That's part of your role as a manager. I've heard it described before that, as a manager, you're acting as a cheerleader and a bulldozer. As a cheerleader, you should be saying to people and to those who work with you, "My team are great!" And then as a bulldozer you get out of their way, you're taking things out of their way that stops people from being as good as they could be. To do that, you need to ensure that giving good feedback is not just giving it, but receiving it from people that you work with. As I say, being prepared for feedback that might be more critical of what you're doing, or what support you should or should not be offering people. That's a major tip in terms of thinking how you can set out your stall – have that definition, and make sure that you're having regular two way feedback.

The fourth of the fundamentals is:

4. Preparation

If I were to pick the daddy of them all, this is it! Preparation is key to giving great feedback. The adage that you might have heard for that is, 'Failing to prepare, preparing to fail'. It's all about the preparation, which is what we're going to look at now.

Feedback Preparation

What I talk about to an awful lot of people is data. Data, data, and more data! What do I mean about data? That's the facts, figures, evidence – what you need to ensure that what you need to talk about is backed up with good information. Both the good, and the less good. Again, it's often easy to find facts, details, evidence or nice comments from people when you're talking about good stuff. It's always a bit trickier when there's a feeling about something.

But it's not just about feelings. What is creating that feeling? What is the behaviour? What is the action that is leading to the feeling that might have a negative about it? That's gathering the data on what it is that you want to talk to the individual about, and that might be talking about other people. Then kick that around, making sure that you're looking at it in all ways, checking that it's valid, making sure that it's coming from a good place in those individuals, and making sure that your feelings around it are coming from a good place in terms of what you want to achieve as a positive eventuality for that individual.

I have a mnemonic here for you to think about:

1. DATA – Discussion, Acts, Timing, Action

D is for the Discussion – having a dialogue between yourself and others to establish the facts of what the situation is.

A is for Acts – think less about feelings, more about acts – what is the act leading to what seems to be an issue? Keep in mind that we're talking about positives as well. What is the good stuff that people are doing, the acts they're doing that are leading to good things that you want to reinforce, in terms of that positive reinforcement? It's thinking about actions or approach. A tip here is not to think or talk about attitude – if you go into a situation and you say, "I want to discuss and understand your attitude to a <person or situation>", I can pretty much guarantee you'll be lighting the blue touch paper, and all you'll get is, "My attitude? What do you mean, my attitude?"

If you go into a situation and talk about, "I want to discuss and understand your behaviour, or approach to, or behaviour towards somebody," that's slightly less incendiary, and you're slightly less likely to get that sort of a reaction. It's focusing on the actions and the acts of individuals.

T for Timing – as was mentioned previously, there is no set way of establishing perfect timings, but keep thinking around 'fresh in the mind', but not so hurried that you haven't had the opportunity to do data gathering.

A is for Action – when you're doing your gathering, and you're critiquing the data, make sure that part of that planning is around thinking about the support and action plan that's going to be fundamental to that part of the discussion. Again, that applies to good feedback in terms of what the action plan is, to support and develop that to make it better, particularly if it's going to be slightly more challenging.

When you've completed that data gathering and you've established that there is something that needs to be raised and what your facts are, the following tips are relevant when thinking about planning for and going into the meeting, both for the minor stuff through to the one-to-ones for a major one-off issue, thinking about it in terms of the good and the less good.

2. Meeting Plan

1. Goal

The first element of that is having a goal. That may seem a bit over the top for a one-to-one, but you really need to think about what you're going to raise, how you're going to raise it, and what you want then to understand from raising it, and what you want them to understand from it and think about doing to change their behaviour of their performance to make things better. Remember – don't necessarily fall into the 'praise sandwich' trap.

It's okay as part of the meeting, particularly one-to-ones, that if the main focus is not a massive disciplinary, or health or performance issue, to focus on one element that you think needs work. It's thinking about it in terms of what you want them to do differently after the meeting, but also thinking about your support and what help you are going to do to make sure that's going to be achieved. Make sure that you know what your goal is for that particular meeting.

2. Physiological Plan

The next one is to think about what is your physiological plan. If you think it's going to be a little trickier, if you've gone through the data gathering then you'll calm your nerves; you'll be more relaxed because you're more assured of the data you've got. The feedback is going to be based on facts, you're doing it from a critical friend, or critiquical friend, and you have a goal. So you're doing it for all the right reasons. Still might be tricky, but acknowledge your nerves – don't try to swallow them or ignore them. Remember that it doesn't mean that you're weak or you're doing something wrong, it means that you are a human being, with a soul, and you have empathy for others. Consciously think about that.

If it's tricky, stay calm. Take regular deep breaths to help that physiological side of things, and think that it's okay to take an adjournment for yourself or for them if things aren't going as well, or it's come as a bit of a surprise and things are getting a bit difficult. Don't plough on regardless if you see that there are some potential issues. It's okay if you want to take a break, but do come back to it and resolve that.

3. Action Plan

The final part of the Meeting Plan is having an Action Plan. Action plans include what you're going to be doing during the meeting and the support afterwards. Your plan must be clear on what they need to do, be clear about what you need to do, about what support you're going to put in place or is in place. Have an agreed Action Plan and follow up date to report afterwards. That follow up date is important. What you should be thinking is that giving good feedback and great feedback is not just about the feedback and that's it, it's about the follow up afterwards. Again, both the good and the less good, because what you want to achieve is a change and improvement, making the good even better.

3. Follow up

Even if it's minor, or major, always make sure there is follow up. Keep in mind also that once you've done it once, particularly if it's tricky, it's then a lot easier to follow up and raise the next time with the individual to say, "How are we doing working on this particular issue?"

📌 Summary

My advice is that, based on my experience on how to give great feedback, even the tricky stuff, these are the things that you should be considering:

1. Setting out your store – what's your definition, what are you going to be making sure that you do on a regular basis as your approach to feedback?
2. Regular is key in terms of having conversations and focusing on the good and the less good.
3. Saying to people, "My approach is, we're going to take things and pull them apart, look at them with a critical eye, to see if we can do them better. This is about making good even better."
4. Always look at it in two ways – you've got to be prepared to be critiqued back, avoiding those pitfalls of just being critical, that the only time you spend with people is to criticise, and making sure that it is not criticism in disguise.
5. Consciously think about, all the time when you're doing those feedbacks, those social niceties. Think about Thumper, making sure that, okay, we're nice people, but we've got to be that friend who makes sure that somebody is aware of those less good things that are part of their personality or performance, that they know about them.
6. Think about your physiology.
7. Prepare for your meetings. Don't forget the 'data' mnemonic – and data, data, data is key.
8. Ensure that you go into the meeting with a goal, with a plan, and with follow up.

I hope this information helps you to give great feedback. You can listen to this webinar and see the slides I used at www.personapm.co.uk/how-to-deliver-great-feedback.

If you have any specific questions about giving feedback, please do get in touch. You can call me on 01488 639 728 or email me at Michelle.Prescott@PersonaPM.co.uk.