CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback is a way of learning more about ourselves and the effect our behaviour has on others.

Constructive feedback increases self-awareness, offers options and encourages development, so it can be important to give and receive it. Constructive feedback does not mean any positive feedback. Negative feedback, given skillfully, is very important and useful.

Destructive feedback means that which is given in an unskilled way which leaves the recipient simply feeling bad with seemingly nothing on which to build, nor options for using the learning.

GIVING FEEDBACK

1. Start with the positive

   Most people need encouragement, to be told when they are doing something well. When offering feedback it can really help the receiver to hear first what you liked or what you feel they have done well.

   eg. "I really like how well you listened to Jim. However on that occasion I did feel you made an assumption about him, without checking it out."

   We often tend to emphasize the negative. The focus is likely to be on mistakes more often than strengths. In a rush to criticise we may overlook the things we liked. If the positive is registered first, any negative is more likely to be listened to, and acted upon.

2. Be specific

   Try to avoid general comments which are not useful when it comes to developing skills. Statements such as "You were brilliant!" or "It was awful" may be pleasant or dreadful to hear, but they do not give enough detail to be useful sources of learning. Pin-point what the person did which led you to use the label "brilliant" or "awful".

   eg "I found your explanation clear and considered and felt you spoke with real enthusiasm!"
   "At that moment I felt you were imposing your values on the other person".

   Specific feedback gives more opportunity for learning.

3. Refer to behaviour which can be changed

   It is not likely to be helpful to give a person feedback about something over which they have no choice.

   eg. "I really don't like your face / your height / your voice etc."

   is not offering information about which a person can do very much. On the other hand, to be told that "It would help me if you smiled more or looked at me when you speak" can give the person something on which to work.

4. Other alternatives

    If you do offer negative feedback, then do not simply criticise, but suggest what the person could have done differently. Turn the negative into a positive suggestion.

    eg. "The fact that you remained seated when Ann came in seemed unwelcoming. I think if you had walked over and greeted her, it would have helped to put her at ease."

5. Be descriptive rather than evaluative

    Tell the person what you saw or heard and the effect it had on you, rather than merely something was "good, bad, etc."

    eg.   "Your tone of voice as you said that really made me feel that you were concerned"

    is likely to be more useful than

    "That was good"

6. Own the feedback

    It can be easy to stay to the other person "You are ...", suggesting that you are offering a universally agreed opinion about that person. In fact all we are entitled to give is our own experience of that person at a particular time. It is also important that we take responsibility for the feedback we offer. Beginning the feedback with "I" or "in my opinion", is a way of avoiding the impression of being the giver of 'cosmic judgements' about the other person.

7. Leave the recipient with a choice

    Feedback which demands change or is imposed heavily on the other person may invite resistance, and it is not consistent with a belief in each of us being autonomous and having "individual sovereignty". It does not involve telling somebody how they must be to suit us. Skilled feedback offers people information about themselves in a way which leaves them with a choice about whether to act on it or not. It can help to examine the consequences of any decision to change or not to change, but does not involve prescribing change.

8. Think what it says about you

    Feedback is likely to say as much about the giver as the receiver. It will say a good deal about our values and what we focus on in others.

    Therefore we can learn about ourselves if we listen to the feedback we give others.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

If we on the receiving end, of feedback we can help ourselves by encouraging the giver to use some of the skills above, but also by:

1.   Listening to the feedback rather than immediately rejecting or arguing with it

Feedback can be uncomfortable to hear, but we may be poorer without it. People may think things without telling us and then we may be at a disadvantage. Remember that people do have their opinions about others and will have their perceptions of our behaviour. It can help to be aware of those. However, do remember that you are also entitled to your opinion and you may choose to ignore it as being of little significance, irrelevant, or referring to behaviour which for some other reason you wish to maintain.

2.   Be clear about what is being said

Try to avoid jumping to conclusions or becoming immediately defensive. If you do, people may cut down their feedback or you may not be able to use it fully. Make sure you understand the feedback before you respond to it. A useful technique can be to paraphrase or repeat the criticism, to check that you have understood.

3.   Check it out with others rather than relying on only one source

If we rely on one source then we may imagine that the individual's opinion is shared by everybody. In fact, if we check out with others, we may find that others experience us differently and we will have a more balanced view of ourselves which can keep the feedback in proportion.

4.   Ask for the feedback you want but don't get

Feedback can be so important that we may have to ask for it, it does not occur naturally. Sometimes we do get feedback, but it is restricted to one aspect of our behaviour and we may have to request feedback we would find useful but do not get.

5.   Decide what you will do as a result of feedback

"It takes two to know one." Each of us needs to know how other people experience us to extend our self-awareness, which is incomplete if merely our own version of ourselves,

So we can use feedback to help our own development. When we receive it we can assess its value, the consequences of ignoring it or using it, and finally decide what we will do as a result of it. If we do not take decisions on the basis of it, then it can be wasted.

Finally, thank the person for giving the feedback. We might benefit from it, it may not have been easy for the person to give, and it is a valuable practice to reinforce in any organisation or relationship.