Principles for 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 is important to learn to both give it and receive it. Constructive feedback does not mean only giving positive feedback. Negative feedback, given skilfully, can be very important and useful. Destructive feedback means that which is given in an unskilled way which leaves the participant simply feeling bad with seemingly nothing on which to build or options for using the learning.

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 like about them or what they have done well e.g. “I really liked the way you responded to Alison, however, on this occasion I did feel that you made an assumption about her without checking it out.”. Our culture tends to emphasise the negative therefore 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 a useful source of learning. Try to pin-point what the person did which lead you to use the label “brilliant” or “awful” e.g. “The way you asked that question just at that moment was really helpful” or “By responding that way you seemed to be imposing your views on the student”. Specific feedback gives more opportunity for learning.

3. Refer to behaviour that can be changed

It is not likely to be helpful to give a person feedback about something over which they have no choice or control e.g. “the size of the student group is too big”, is not offering information about which the person can do very much. On the other hand, to be told that “It may help to think of ways of breaking the size of the group down” you can give a person something on which to work.

4. Offer alternatives

If you do offer negative feedback then do not simply criticise but suggest what the person could have done differently. Turn negative feedback into a positive suggestion e.g. “You could try breaking the large group down into smaller groups
and use activities such as small scale research projects and seminar presentations”.

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. e.g. “Your tone of voice a you said that made me feel that you were concerned” is more likely to be useful than “That was good”.

6. **Own the feedback**

It can be easy to say to the other person “You are…”, suggesting that you are offering a universally agreed opinion about the 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 with “I”, for example, “I thought that...” or using “In my opinion...”, is a way of avoiding the impression of being the giver of “cosmic judgements” about the other person.

7. **Leaving the recipient with a choice**

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

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