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A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO FEEDBACK

A USER'S MANUAL FOR FOSTERING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & GROWTH

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Us over yonder at Nash Consulting have been talking about feedback since day one. And, as it turns out, feedback is still important. So welcome to the Managing with Mind & Heart Feedback Issue. We hope this can serve as more than just a quick skim for you. We hope you can use this as a resource guide – one you can reference before you have to have one of those conversations that none of us look forward to and all of us prefer less than a trip to the dentist. Whether you need to give or receive feedback, this is a guide for how to do so in a way that'll keep you connected relationally to those you manage. All of our relationships are molded by our words and actions, and is there anything more important than the quality of our relationships?

We hope that you find this resource useful and consider sharing it with colleagues and friends who also may benefit from it. Our workplaces and relationships are always more meaningful when we understand the art of feedback, because it's the vehicle for growth, progress, and trust.

ADAPTIVE SKILLS

The Foundation of Relationship Building

If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.
– Daniel Goleman

In our ideal manager world, the people and situations we encounter day-to-day fit us perfectly: events happen at my pace and on my timeline, so I never need to be flexible; others always agree with my perspective, so there's no need for me to try to understand theirs; people "get me" and can read my mind, so I don't have to work at communicating; I never make a mistake, so there's never anything to own or apologize for; others naturally do what I want, so I never have to confront or have a difficult conversation. I am the center of my perfect universe, and everybody and everything in it conforms exactly to what works for me.

And then my alarm goes off, and I wake up.

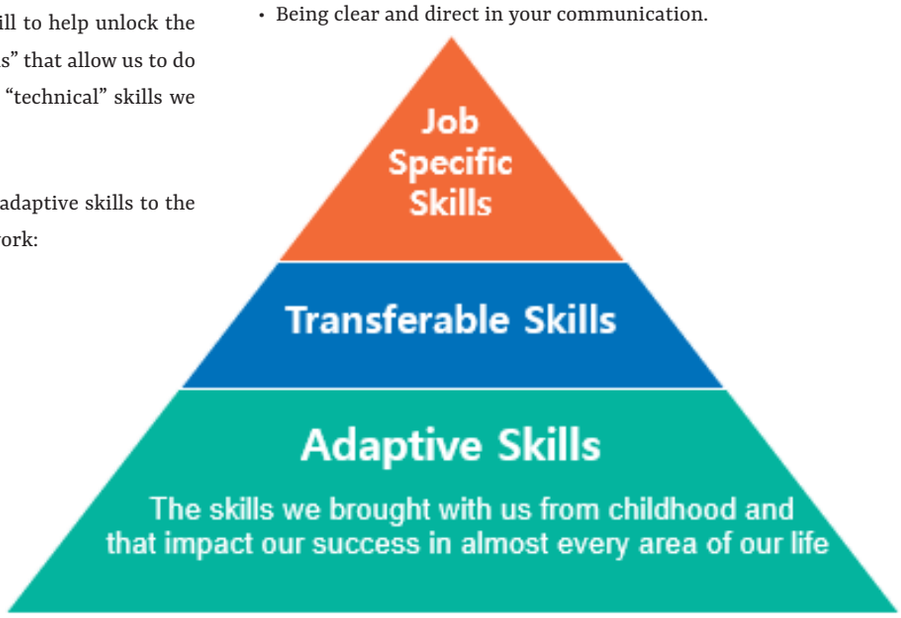
In the real world, circumstances don't always—and sometimes rarely—align with our preferences. Deadlines don't always fit our work schedule. Our peers and employees are neither our clones nor our servants. And for us to do excellent work together, we'll need much more than what each of us personally brings to the table. This means that to be effective manager we need to adapt ourselves to this reality and use our leadership and skill to help unlock the potential around us. And yet the "skills" that allow us to do this are unlike the many other, more "technical" skills we bring to our job.

To clarify this concept, let's compare adaptive skills to the other kinds of skills we bring to our work:

- Job Specific Skills – These are the skills we use every day that we wouldn't use if we changed career tracks: using a CAD/CAM program,repairing a diesel engine, writing software code, etc.
- Transferrable Skills – These are more general skills that we can use in a different career track: general computer skills, public speaking, facilitating a meeting, etc.
- Adaptive Skills – These are the skills we brought with us from childhood and that form the foundation of our success in almost everything we do, professionally and personally. (These are roughly synonymous with the concept of Emotional IQ, but that's another topic.)

Consider the following examples of adaptive skills:

- Listening so that others feel heard. (According to research, people who feel heard feel cared about.)
- Receiving feedback non-defensively. (If you get up the guts to give someone feedback, and they punish you by being defensive, what will you do differently next time? Right! You won't talk to them about your concerns, because you'll consider them "unapproachable.")
- Giving corrective feedback without creating defensiveness. (Telling your truth while staying connected relationally.)
- Seeing a situation from another's point of view.
- Exercising your authority when you'd rather just be "buddy-buddy."
- Owning mistakes quickly and proactively.
- Staying calm and engaged while experiencing strong emotions.
- Being clear and direct in your communication.



We bet that if you scanned your memory banks and thought of the most challenging managers you've worked for, they weren't difficult because they lacked intelligence or expertise. Rather, we suspect it's because of their lack of adaptive skills, which usually comes right alongside a general inability to see the impact they have on those around them. In contrast, the healthiest leaders we see aren't perfect, but they've decided to make growth in their adaptive skills a professional development priority.

If we fail to recognize the impact we have on those around us and fail to adapt in order to engage with them more effectively, we (and others) will suffer. Listening so people feel respected, showing up non-defensively, controlling our emotional impulses, and owning our mistakes – these skills are vital to the health of our relationships. Luckily, with practice and patience, these skills can be learned.

In our workshops, we spend hours examining and dissecting the path to growing and developing our adaptive skills. There is simply too much to share in this blog post, so instead we'll direct you to the relevant episodes of The Managing with Mind & Heart Podcast in which we really dig into this whole adaptive skills thing. Some of the episodes will explore the concept of adaptive skills, and others (such as our episodes on giving and receiving feedback) will help you to work on developing specific adaptive skills. Click on the links below, or you can also find them on all major podcast platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts.

Ep.04 – The Periodic Table of Skills (Adaptive Skills 1/2)
Ep.05 – Are You Even Listening to Me? (Adaptive Skills 2/2)
Ep.06 – The Truth Can Hurt (Receiving Feedback)
Ep.07 – The S*** Sandwich (Giving Feedback 1/3)
Ep.08 – The Graduate School of Feedback (Giving Feedback 2/3)

The Heart of Heatlhy Conversations

LISTENING WITH CARE & RESPECT

> *The most basic of human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.*
> *– Ralph Nichols*

There is a big difference between hearing what someone said to you and that person actually feeling heard. And it's a hugely important difference! According to research, most people experience being truly heard as synonymous with being cared about. In fact, in one study teenagers who were being listened to by adults who used a specific set of listening skills (see below) later reported that they believed the adult they had been talking to cared about them – even though there was nothing in the content of the conversation that would have given them that impression. Being listened to feels like being cared about, which makes this particular adaptive skill a "must have" for anyone who manages other people (or has relationships of any type). For employees to become fully engaged, they need to know that the person they report to directly cares about them as human beings, and not just as cogs in their system.

Whenever you want to improve an adaptive skill, you want to work on two levels simultaneously: the internal (thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs) and the external (observable behaviors). So, let's do this!

How to listen so others feel heard:

The internal work: (What should be going on in your head?)

1. Focus! It's time to do your best to stop thinking about that Game of Thrones episode you watched last night, no matter how mind-blowing it may have been.
2. Curiosity. It's a mindset you can choose, believe it or not. And it's the opposite of judgment. Embrace your inner child who is endlessly interested in understanding.
3. Empathy. Ask yourself what it would be like to be in that person's world. What is it like to experience what they are experiencing?

The external work: (What should you be doing physically and verbally?)

1. Practice attentive body language. This means good eye contact, the occasional head nod, mirroring and more.
2. Shhhhhhh! Do not interrupt. It feels like aggression mixed with arrogance with a dose of "I don't care about you" thrown in. Also – watch your airtime. Listen more than you talk.
3. Paraphrase. "Are you saying he spends too much time away from home?" "It sounds like you're saying she doesn't really care about doing quality work." It demonstrates that you're tracking what they're saying and provides room for correcting any misunderstanding.
4. Put away distractions. No, you cannot tweet and listen at the same time.
5. Empathetic reflection. Where paraphrasing shows that you're tracking what the person is saying, empathetic reflection shows that you're intuiting what the person is feeling. ("Jeeze, that must have felt terrible.")
6. Don't be a fixer. Not everyone is looking for advice. For most people, being truly heard feels much better than being instructed, advised, corrected or counseled. It doesn't mean you never offer a solution if you think you have one. It just means that "fixing" isn't your default mode and that you ask for permission before offering advice.
7. Ask questions. We're not talking the third degree here, but do show your curiosity and engagement by enquiring into their world.
8. Don't make it about yourself. "Oh, let me tell you about a time that happened to me…" Okay, it doesn't mean you can't talk about yourself and relate to your own experience. It just means that you're mindful of not focusing on yourself. (Don't steal their thunder.)

Here's the bottom line: we can all become professional listeners. Of course, for some of us it will take lots of practice, and that's okay. The good news: most of us in the workforce will have dozens of opportunities every day to do exactly that.

For more on this, check out our video on developing great listening skills.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK NON-DEFENSIVELY

The Key to Improvement

Great teams do not hold back with one another. They admit their mistakes, their weaknesses, and their concerns without fear of reprisal.
– Patrick Lencioni

Feeling defensive is human. Defensiveness is how we survived as a species. It's a manifestation of a fear response that takes place in our amygdala – a small, almond-shaped region in the brain that detects and responds to threats by prompting fear and triggering your "fight, flight, or freeze" instincts.

In one research project, subjects were hooked up to electrodes monitoring their brain functions and put into a virtual reality situation in which they were walking down a dark alley at night with the sound of footsteps approaching them from behind. At that moment, their amygdala experienced a whole lot of extra activity and blood flow. Then here's the crazy part: The researchers took the subjects out of the virtual reality environment but left the sensors on their heads and said to them, "You know, I have some feedback for you about how you handled that experiment..." And guess what? Their amygdala did the same exact thing – extra blood flow to the "fear center." In the first microseconds (literally .02 seconds), your amygdala cannot differentiate between physical dangers, such as someone approaching you in a dark alley, and social dangers, such as someone saying, "I have some feedback for you." You can't even help it – it's automatic.

Yes, feedback. The big "F" word. When you know someone is about to give you corrective or critical feedback, your brain will likely experience a fear response. It happens first at an automatic and subconscious level. And how does our fear response then show up behaviorally? Defensiveness.

When there's a threat to our self-esteem, self-concept, or social status; when rejection or unfairness is possible; when we know we're about to be told something about us that isn't positive, our amygdala freaks out, and we go into defense mode. It's all due to our survival-oriented monkey brains.

And that's a big workplace culture paradox: to keep feedback channels of communication open with our colleagues, bosses, and employees (especially with our employees), we need to receive feedback non-defensively. Yet, as we know, feeling defensive is human, and we can't help but feel this way when people give us feedback.

So, what do we do? We can work against evolution and practice specific mindsets and behaviors that will allow us to show up non-defensively.

The Art of Showing Up Non-Defensively

Ok, so you get it. Showing up non-defensively matters if you hope to build trust, respect, and psychological safety in the workplace and in your life. So, how do you accomplish this? Let's start with the internal mindset.

When someone is about to give you feedback, remember to practice these three helpful attitudes:

1. Differentiation (receive it like you would a gift). Get some distance – some separation – between you and the feedback. It's just information. Receive it the way you receive a gift: you don't have to keep it, right? But you don't shove it away and refuse to open it, do you? You at least receive it, open it, consider what you're going to do with it, and then make a choice about it. The good news is it's your choice! That's how feedback works. Feedback doesn't define you, just like you're not obligated to keep that ugly sweater your Aunt Betsy sent you. This mindset can help combat your initial reaction of defensiveness by creating safety and distance between you and the person who worked up the nerve to give you feedback. And this mindset is coupled with the practice of...

2. Curiosity and openness. If you only practice the differentiation mindset, you might fall into the trap of rejecting all the helpful feedback that comes your way. Add the attitude of curiosity, and actually be open to the possibility that the other person may have valuable information for you. And you know what's cool? It's almost impossible to be defensive and curious at the same time. Curiosity is the desire to seek a deeper understanding, and defensiveness is the urge to push away the uncomfortable. The two don't coexist well.

3. Self-Compassion. There's a lot to say about self-compassion, so we encourage you to read this blog post we wrote about it and how harnessing this mindset is the precursor to a growth mindset. The bottom line: self-compassion is the practice of experiencing a potential setback fully (i.e., this tough feedback you're receiving right now) from a place of grace and mercy, remembering it doesn't define you and that you're able to grow from this experience. Now let's move on to the external behaviors.

By practicing the previous attitudes and mindsets, you can actually start feeling less defensive. But you can't wait until you feel non-defensive to show up non-defensively. Fake it til' you make it, baby. You have to practice specific behaviors that allow you to come across non-defensively because, again, you will feel defensive – and showing that defensiveness can damage the trust and respect between you and your employees and loved ones.

Here are some key behaviors to practice while receiving feedback:

1. Listen. Meaning, shut up for a moment and look like you're listening because this is where defensiveness usually first shows up – right there in the first seconds. "Wait, that's not true!" "You don't understand the context." "But you asked me to do it that way!" "Let me explain." No. Shut it. Listen, and listen really well. We're talking eye contact, attentive and open body language, all the works. When you start pushing back before the other person feels heard, you look defensive.

2. Ask questions. And there are three good reasons to do so:

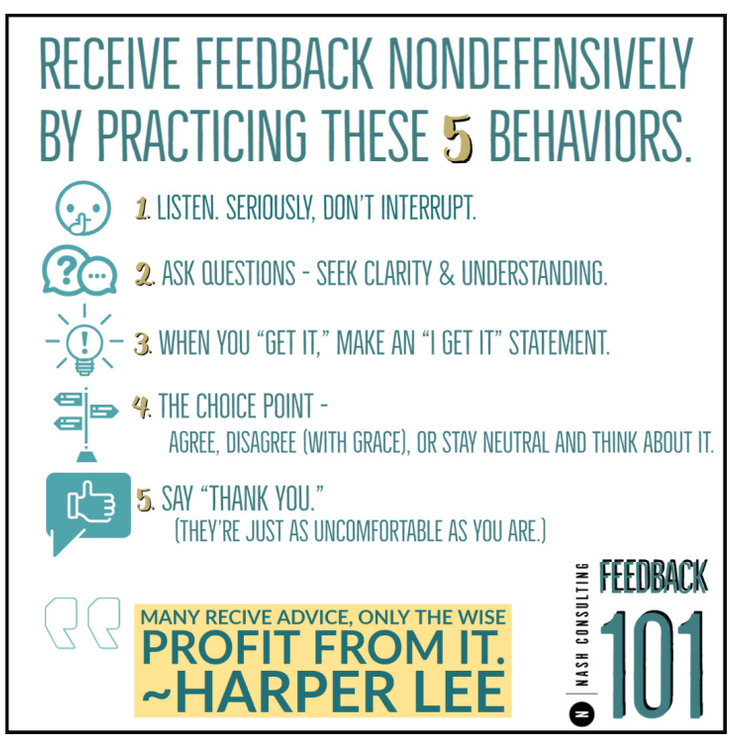
- When you ask questions, you get more information. If someone tells you that you're not showing up well during meetings, ask them more about that. "Tell me more..." Seek clarity to wrap your head around it so you can figure out what to do with it.
- Asking questions demonstrates that you're open and receptive – the exact opposite of defensiveness.
- Asking questions buys you some time, which is helpful because, as you'll soon see, you'll need to make a choice. Asking questions creates more of a dialogue as you figure out where to land.

3. An "I get it" statement. This is anything that demonstrates you hear the other person, such as, "Yeah, that makes sense," "I get what you're saying," or "If I understand you correctly, this is what you're saying..." All of these are "I get it statements," and notice they are not the same as agreeingwith the feedback. You can show that you understand without agreeing. The point is to make this feedback channel feel safe for the other person, whether the feedback is correct or not.

4. The choice point. Alright, so you listened really well, and they felt heard. Now you must decide on what to do with this feedback. Here are your three options:

- Agree. If you can find anything to agree with at all, that's a terrific option, even if it's just some of the feedback. "You know what, you're right. I can see now that I interrupt too much. I'll work on that." And remember: If you practice genuinely being open to this feedback, you may learn something useful.
- Disagree. Believe it or not, you can disagree with feedback without being defensive. But if you do land here, you can see why it's so important that you did all the above behaviors first. People who feel truly heard and respected will be less likely to take your disagreement as defensiveness. Also – make sure you disagree gracefully, not aggressively. "I respect what you're saying. I see it differently."
- Stay neutral. It's perfectly acceptable to say, "That's really good feedback. Thank you. Let me process that for a while." You don't actually have to decide right there in the moment. (Of course, if it's your boss letting you know she needs you to start being on time, "let me think about that for a while" might not be the best option.)

5. Thank them. Remember, we repeat behavior we get rewarded for, and a "thank you" is just that - a reward. You may not like negative feedback (who does?), but you absolutely want your employees to experience you as safe. No matter your choice point, you can thank them for the feedback because they respected and trusted you enough to take the risk. And when an entire workgroup respects each other enough to take risks, and it's safe to do so, performance soars.



As with all these skills, this takes practice. And practice means messing up...usually a lot. Stick with it, put in the work, be kind to yourself, make adjustments as you learn, and this stuff will start to sink in. (If you want more on receiving feedback, we have a podcast episode on it.)

Helping Others Improve

GIVING FEEDBACK WITH GRACE & HONESTY

Imagine that you're walking down a dark alley at night. You hear footsteps running up from behind you. At this moment the "fear center" of your brain, the amygdala, senses a threat and lights up like a Christmas tree.

Now, imagine that the next day, you're back at the office. Your boss walks up to you and says, "Hey – can I offer you some feedback?" If your amygdala (the region that serves as the brain's main center for processing emotions) were hooked up to electrodes, you'd notice that your brain responds in the same way it did during your alleyway scare. Our brains cannot tell the difference between physical and social danger.

From an evolutionary perspective, fear is quite useful. This deeply ingrained emotion protected our ancestors from saber-tooth tigers and other such grumpy predators. On the evolutionary timeline of Homo sapiens, these physical dangers aren't that far in the past. Our brains haven't evolved to the point in which they can immediately recognize the difference between life-threatening dangers and social dangers. Our survival brains have first dibs on interpreting the environmental threats and react quickly to keep us safe. All of this is happening in the brain unconsciously and at lightning speed.

Ok, history lesson over. Let's get practical.

It's important to keep in mind that when we give someone corrective or critical feedback, it will likely trigger a "fear response" in that person, which will show up as defensiveness, leading to that person's inability to learn from and respond well to the feedback. To complicate things further, this fear response will probably be more extreme if you're that person's manager because you also have a power differential over them.

The solution, of course, is not to avoid giving feedback – we need this type of communication in the workplace if we hope to create and maintain a culture of accountability, reliability, psychological safety, and improvement. The solution is to learn the art of delivering feedback in a way that lowers the other person's defenses. And it really is an art. It's not uncommon for us to work with leaders who view giving feedback the same way they view flossing teeth: it's not complicated – it's unpleasant, but we just have to do it. Yet, there is a big difference between feedback and effective feedback. If you want your feedback to work (and we suspect you do), you'll need to intentionally practice some specific and necessary behaviors that can truly make your feedback effective.

What are these behaviors that make for excellent feedback? Let's start with the simple and work our way up to the more difficult.

Level 1: The Pre-Requisites to Giving Feedback

When there is a threat to our self-esteem, self-concept, and social status, our primate brains go into self-defense mode. Therefore, our goal in giving feedback is to lower the other person's defensiveness. There are three things to do before you give feedback:

1. Think it through, at least a little. As opposed to the "shoot from the hip" approach, spend some time considering what you're going to say, how you're going to say it, and what exactly you're trying to get across.
2. Don't do drive-by feedback – give them time to respond and talk about it. "Hey – your report was terrible…ok, got to go!" Don't be the person who just dumps your feedback on them and walks away. This will cause more defensiveness and resentment, and it's just no way to treat another human being.
3. Don't make them wait. "Hey, is it ok if I give you some feedback?" (*defensiveness starts to settle in*) "Oh, you know what, I have to go – let's talk tomorrow." (*Walks away twirling evil mustache.*) This isn't kind. The person will spend the next 24 hours freaking out and trying to figure out what terrible thing they did. An old Native American saying goes something like this: "You give me a blank, and I fill it in with demons."

> *Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a [person's] growth without destroying [their] roots.*
> *– Frank A. Clark*

Level 2: Undergraduate School of Feedback

Now let's get into the dos and don'ts of an effective feedback conversation. What behaviors should we engage in (or not engage in) when delivering feedback in order to lower the other person's defensives?

DO use a relaxed tone and body language. Your tone and body language should give the message that you're on their side. If you talk to them in a way that sounds mad or frustrated, that person's flight or fight radar will go off, and they will get defensive.

DON'T give general feedback. Saying something like "you have poor social skills" isn't useful. They can probably think of a hundred social skills, and are they really lacking all of them? Unless they're one of the main characters in Dumb and Dumber, it's doubtful. Unfortunately, it's easy for us to give general feedback, partly out of fear. We don't want to dial in and directly confront the specific issues, so we leave it open so as not to offend them. This approach relies on just crossing your fingers and hoping they get the real message. They rarely do. If you want the feedback to work, you need to be specific.

DO engage in dialogue and DON'T do a monologue. No one likes a long, corrective speech. One of the five things our brains are always scanning the environment for is a thing called Status. (See our blog post on SCARF and the Brain Science of Engagement.) A threat to our Status is the condition of feeling less-than or one-down from someone. It's an unconscious process, and it spins our brain right into defensive mode. Approach your feedback as a discussion that involves a back-and-forth, give-and-take style of conversation.

DON'T delay feedback. How would it land with you if someone said, "I have a problem with something you did eight months ago"? Probably not very well. If someone recognizes that you're willing to hold on to something for eight months, you will almost certainly lose their trust. It's hard to accept feedback from someone you don't trust.

DO give feedback in the right location. Give it in a place where that person won't be embarrassed. A private place is almost always best.

DO assume good intent. Although this isn't exactly a behavior, it's a useful mental exercise to practice. Assume everyone has the same shared goals in life as you do: to be happy, successful, and relationally connected. Let's assume this person (even our most sticky colleagues) did not wake up that morning trying to figure out who they can annoy today. We can assume that, generally, people have good intentions and motivations that are similar to ours.

DON'T use hyperbole. When you say something like, "you're always late!" you'll likely get pushback. Even if that person is late 364 days a year, they'll probably point out the one day they were on time. Using generalizations or exaggerations will immediately put the other person on the defense because you're not actually telling the truth.

DON'T pile on. "Now that I have your attention, here's a whole list of things I don't like about you." This shows the other person you have been saving up feedback and will cause paranoia, defensiveness, and a loss of trust. This is also why you shouldn't wait until annual reviews to provide feedback. (See our post on running regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings.)

DO use praise. This is just a head nod to saying something positive, even when we have to correct behaviors. This doesn't mean we always have to give a "feedback sandwich." It just means that if you can find something positive to say that's in the same area code as your corrective feedback, go for it! For example, you can comment on all the aspects that you like about their staff meetings and then provide feedback on the elements you'd like to see done differently. (Hint: Try to avoid the word "but" when transitioning from positive feedback to corrective. It will just land better.)

DON'T assume they totally got what you said. You don't have to do this every time, but if you've just had a somewhat complex conversation, you might want to check that what you said is what was heard. Make sure you both are on the same page.

Level 3: The Graduate School of Feedback

This is where it really becomes an art. You can give feedback about three things, and there are three things about which you should not give feedback. Following these principles will help lower defensiveness, bring more clarity, and avoid relational damage. Let's break it down.

Things about which you CAN give feedback: (B.I.R.)

1. You can give feedback regarding behaviors. Behaviors are things that can be seen and heard.
2. You can give feedback regarding the impact those behaviors have had or might have in the future.
3. You can give feedback regarding what you would like them to do instead – the replacement behaviors.

You likely noticed that we are cheating by saying there are three things about which you can give feedback. There is really only one: Behaviors. Remember B.I.R. -Behavior, Impact, and Replacement behavior.

Things about which you CANNOT give feedback

You cannot give feedback regarding a person's character. Avoid using words like rude, lazy, or disrespectful. These are all character words. They aren't behaviors. These are judgments of the other person. Interrupting people or failing to get work done on time are behaviors, and people respond better when we can drill down to the things that can be seen or heard. And when you've discussed the behaviors that need to change, you can talk about the impact those behaviors have and what you'd like them to do instead.

You cannot give feedback regarding what someone is thinking or their intentions. When you say something like, "you're just trying to make people feel bad," people will get defensive and push back. When you do this, you're engaging in "mind-reading," and unless you're a Jedi Knight, you can't read minds. Stick with behaviors.

You cannot give feedback regarding someone's feelings or attitudes. When you say, "I know you don't like her" or "I realize you hate your job," you are making assumptions about attitudes, unless they've specifically told you these things. The truth is you can't see attitudes. They're invisible. What you're seeing are behaviors, so talk about those. What are you seeing and hearing that gives you the impression they don't like her or don't like their job? Don't make assumptions.

Now that you have earned an advanced degree in giving effective feedback, let's put it all together by way of a real-world example.

Patrick was seen by colleagues as often being rude and disrespectful (non-behaviors) during team meetings. Up to this point, he'd received "just stop it" feedback. "You're being rude – stop it." "You're being disrespectful - knock it off." And, big surprise, this feedback wasn't working. He was just getting angrier and more defensive because he felt insulted and misunderstood.

One of our consultants was able to sit in on the meetings and observe Patrick's behaviors. Throughout an hour-long meeting, Patrick would roll his eyes, slouch in his chair, text on his phone, turn his chair away from the speaker, and shake his head. His colleagues were clearly displeased with his behaviors. But no one had actually given him specific feedback on these behaviors, their impact, and what type of replacement behaviors he should practice.

We had the chance to coach Patrick. The consultant described the behaviors he witnessed in this meeting. All the behaviors (not character words or assumptions about thoughts or feelings) described to him were objectively true. It took about five minutes for him to get it.

Next, Patrick and the consultant discussed the impact these behaviors might be having. They were distracting. They were discouraging people from speaking up. In a big way, they were causing the goals of the meeting to not be met: collaboration, authenticity, and team building. It took a while, but this process of discussing real and potential impacts without having a bunch of labels thrown at him really hit home.

Lastly, Patrick and the consultant collaborated together on possible replacement behaviors. These are the behaviors we'd like to see as opposed to the eye-rolling and interrupting. Again, he got it.

After the next staff meeting, the consultant heard from Patrick's colleagues. At one point in the meeting, Patrick had said, "that's a good idea – I hadn't thought of it like that." The person who told us this said she thought everyone's heads were going to blow up, they were so surprised. Later he said, "Ok – that's not quite the way I see it. Here's the way I look at it..." Now those are replacement behaviors.

Our conversation with Patrick involved deep listening and empathy first, then a discussion around behaviors, the impact of those behaviors, and replacement behaviors. B.I.R. When we followed up six months later, things were very different with Patrick. It stuck. It was sustainable behavior change.

You don't need to hire a rock star consulting firm like ours (although we're always here to help) to create a culture of effective feedback. Everyone can and should practice these skills. When an entire organization (or family!) is committed to practicing the kind of feedback behaviors that lower others' defenses and keep you relationally connected, that's where the magic happens.