

Delivering Feedback

Once you have carefully collated feedback for an individual, and planned the details of where, when and how you will deliver it, comes the crux: the delivery itself. There are a large number of models and methods available to help guide you through this process. This article summarises their common themes into practical advice, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of some of the better known models.

The essentials of good feedback delivery

While you might want to refer to a specific model to guide you through a good feedback session, the following advice may be enough to help you think clearly about the delivery process and build your own structure, which you can vary as necessary to suit any situation.



Be specific

Vague comments like “That report wasn’t good enough” or “Your telephone manner is excellent” probably won’t be helpful. Giving specific examples of something that needs work or deserves praise is much more likely to resonate with the person and give them something to work with. For example, “Your monthly sales report needs to include more analysis of customer demographics” or “The way you stayed calm and dealt with that angry complaint this morning was excellent; well done.” Letting people know exactly what they did well or need to improve on is the best way to help them develop.

Stick to the facts

Use information, not interpretation. For example, if you receive a complaint about a team member’s phone manner, don’t begin with “We need to discuss your telephone

manner". Start by presenting the issue: "I received a complaint from a client about your phone conversation yesterday. Can you tell me what happened?" Don't make assumptions about the wider causes of an issue – address that which you can factually recount and for which you can provide evidence.

Show relevance

Explain the impact of a person's behaviour or performance, so they can put it into context. This is important not only for helping them understand why something has caused a problem and how seriously they need to consider it (is it a major issue or just something that needs tweaking?) but also to help them appreciate the benefit of a positive performance, which should encourage them to keep it up.

Be balanced

Make sure to give a fair representation of the situation. For example, if a report was mostly good, but had one area which required attention, then spend an equivalent amount of time on praising the good aspects before addressing the area for improvement. Equally, weigh the evidence yourself. If you have received one complaint about a staff member who has otherwise performed very well, keep that perspective in mind. If, on the other hand, you have identified a number of issues which need to be addressed, choose the few most important and focus on them. Overloading the person with too many things is likely to be confusing and demotivating.

Listen

Feedback and any subsequent goal setting will be much more effective if the employee feels involved in the process and that their voice has been heard, so ask for their input and opinions. When delivering constructive feedback, you should be prepared to listen to any mitigating circumstances or new, relevant information. Ask your team member for their side of the story and be prepared not only to listen, but to change your ultimate objectives, if appropriate.

Look forward

A major factor to keep in mind is that feedback should be constructive, not destructive. It is about providing a path for the person to improve in future, not about punishing them for previous behaviour. Work with the employee to agree on what needs to change and to establish a goal to work towards, as well as steps to take. Be sure the person feels comfortable with their target and has access to everything they need to achieve it, offering assistance where appropriate.

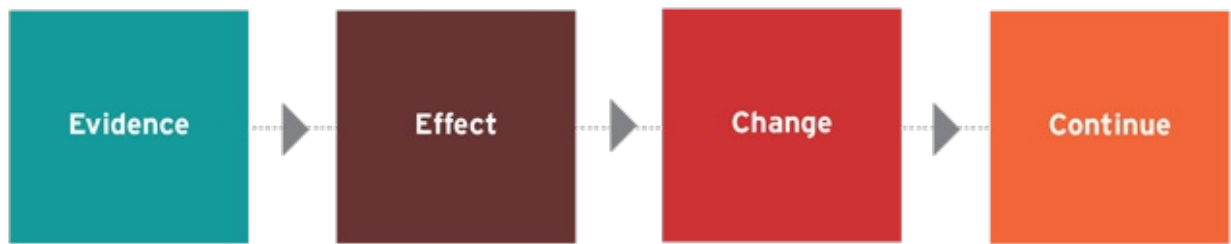
Follow up

Agree a timescale to catch up again and discuss progress towards the targets you have agreed. Make sure the person feels comfortable approaching you, if they need to, to discuss the issue(s) further or ask for more guidance.

Methods and models

There are a huge number of different models for giving good feedback. Some are better suited to certain situations than others, so you should feel comfortable picking whichever is the best fit for your specific situation. Listed here is a selection of better known models:

E2C2



While it can be used for all feedback, the E2C2 model is most useful for delivering constructive feedback, by identifying what needs to change, why and how it can be changed, as well as validating successful behaviours.

- **Evidence:** give a factual account of directly observed behaviour only.
“Your last couple of reports have contained a number of factual errors.”
(Describe what these were.)
- **Effect:** describe the impact of the behaviour.
“This undermines our credibility and means that we need to re-issue the report with corrections, which takes time.”
- **Change:** clearly describe what they need to do differently.
“I suggest that in future you double check all the figures and then ask someone to proof it for you before it is submitted.”
- **Continue:** identify good behaviours which should stay the same.
“You have a real flair for writing reports and getting them out on time. Let’s find a way to keep delivering them on time without compromising on accuracy.”

CEDAR

There are two versions of the CEDAR model. The first was created by Anna Wildman in 2003. This model’s ‘diagnosis’ step makes it stand out as a method for inviting discussion and input from the employee, followed by the ‘actions’ step, inviting them to make their own suggestions for how they can improve. It is a good model for engaging the recipient in the feedback and involving them in the process of their own improvement, when you have identified a specific issue which needs to be addressed.

- **Context:** explain the importance and impact of the feedback.
“I’m concerned that in the last client meeting, we weren’t completely prepared and this may have damaged their impression of us.”
- **Examples:** illustrate with specifics.
“For example, we didn’t have the new design samples ready and there were several questions we couldn’t answer.”
- **Diagnosis:** ask for input and discuss why it went well or badly.
“Why do you think we were not able to meet the client’s expectations?”
- **Actions:** ask for suggestions as to how they can improve next time; do not make your own suggestions too soon. For example, you might say:
“What can we do differently next time to ensure we are better prepared for a client meeting?”
- **Review:** agree a date to review.
“Let’s get together a few days before the next meeting and make sure we’ve covered everything we need to.”

The second version of CEDAR was defined by Scott Bradbury in 2007. This one focuses on identifying a gap between expectations and performance, then identifying the cause of the gap before discussing solutions. Again, it invites participation from the employee; however, it is probably more useful where there is not necessarily a specific event to address, but a general shortfall in performance.

- **Clarify** the relevant expectations.
“We need all agents to be handling an average of 10 calls an hour.”
- **Explain** your view of current performance.
“Currently, it appears you are only handling seven calls an hour, on average.”
- **Discuss** the reasons for the difference between the two.
“Why do you think your call rate is lower than average?”
- **Agree** on appropriate action to fix the problem.
“OK, so you’re finding the computer system difficult to navigate. Let’s arrange some extra training and practice for you to become more comfortable with it.”
- **Review** the outcome (after training and a period of further observation).
“I see your call rate is up to nine calls an hour. How are you finding using the system, now? Was the extra training helpful? Is there anything else we can look at to help get you up to 10 calls an hour?”

STAR/AR

The STAR/AR model is useful for clarifying your own thinking when approaching feedback about a specific event. It can be used for both praise and constructive feedback, and helps to ensure that the person is clear about exactly what they did, the context and impact of their action, as well as identifying what they should do in future when faced with a similar situation.

- **Situation or Task:** what the person was doing or should have done.
“You were on reception last week when an urgent call came in for me, but I wasn’t at my desk.”
“You were inputting claims forms into the system last Friday.”
- **Action:** what they did.
“You took a detailed message, then came and found me to deliver it in person.”
“You mistakenly added claims data from one customer into another’s record.”
- **Result:** the outcome.
“I was able to return the call promptly, with all the relevant information I needed to hand, which was extremely helpful in heading off a potential crisis. Well done.”
“We sent a claims letter out to the wrong customer and didn’t send one to the customer who was making a claim.”

If the feedback is praise, then this is enough. If there is a need for change, then continue on to establish:

- **Alternative Action:** what they can do differently next time.
“Take more care when identifying a customer on the system and ensure all the details on screen match those on the claims form.”
- **Alternative Result:** what the desired result will be.
“Claims letters should only go out to the correct customers.”

AID

Similarly to STAR/AR, AID is helpful to clearly identify a specific action or event, its impact on the team or organisation, and what you want them to do, either to rectify the problem or to avoid it in future. It doesn’t leave much scope for employee interaction or input though, so is probably most helpful for delivering a clear, purposeful message.

- **Action:** what the person did.
“You didn’t include a purchase order number on the sales paperwork you sent to Accounts.”
- **Impact:** what effect it had.
“The invoice went out without a purchase order number, which has delayed payment, and Accounts have had to reissue a new invoice.”
- **Do:** what you would like them to do now.
“Please double check your paperwork in future and make sure to ask the client if there is a purchase order number which needs to be included on invoices.”

The following two models are not so much step-by-step guides, but general advice to bear in mind when planning how to approach feedback delivery.

BOOST



Balanced
Observed
Objective
Specific
Timely

BOOST is a popular model, relevant for both praise and constructive feedback. It keeps things positive, while still ensuring that any problem areas are addressed, by helping you ensure that feedback is:

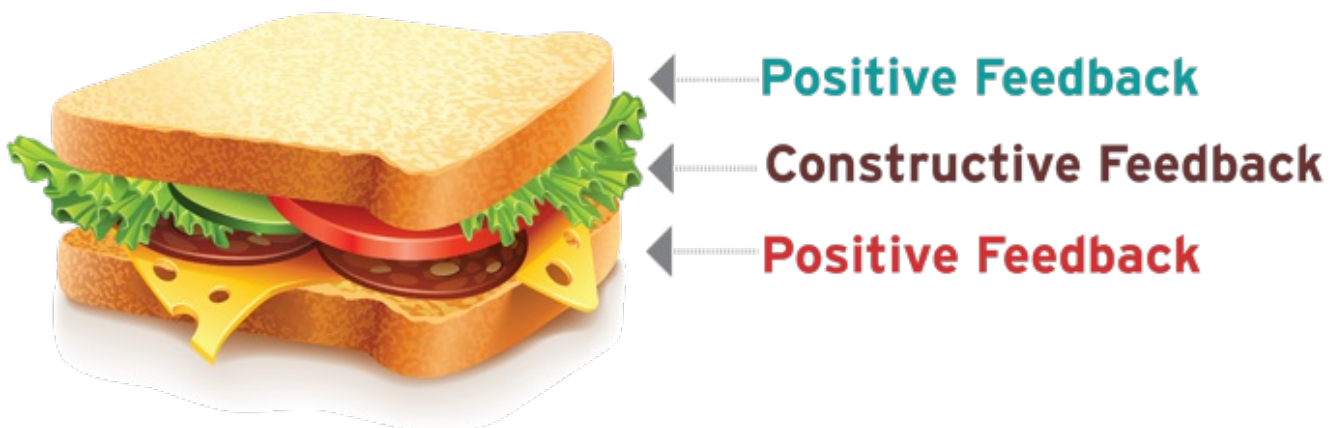
- **B**alanced: focus on strengths as well as areas for development.
- **O**bserved: only discuss behaviours you have observed.
- **O**bjective: avoid judgements and focus on behaviour, not personality.
- **S**pecific: provide specific examples of the observed behaviour.
- **T**imely: give feedback soon after the observed behaviour.

SIPP

The SIPP model is specifically for giving praise and designed to build a person's confidence and self-belief. There is no scope within this for negative or constructive commentary, but it is good advice for the effective delivery of praise. The SIPP model requires feedback to be:

- **S**incere: be honest, genuine and open.
- **I**ncident-based: discuss a specific incident or incidents.
- **P**ositive: only give praise; avoid all negative comments.
- **P**ersonal: look the person in the eye and address them personally.

The Feedback Sandwich



The Feedback Sandwich is one of the best known models for giving feedback, whereby you precursor any constructive feedback with praise and then finish the conversation with praise. The theory is that this will keep the recipient positive, while still delivering the necessary corrective feedback.

"I thought you handled that presentation well. You delivered the information succinctly and clearly, and your visuals were relevant and informative."

"The one thing I would have done differently is to slow down and make sure everyone understood everything. I think there were a few places where some people were a bit lost on the more complicated topics and would have benefitted from the chance to ask questions."

“Overall, though, a job well done. You obviously put in a lot of hard work.”

However, these days many L&D professionals eschew the Feedback Sandwich because of the number of potential problems with the approach:

- **Criticism obscured by praise:** giving praise at the beginning and end of the conversation can outweigh the constructive message, which is then lost.
- **Praise devalued by criticism:** delivering praise alongside constructive comments can take the shine off the positive messages, giving them less value.
- **Loss of trust:** if the Feedback Sandwich is used as a standard delivery mechanism for constructive feedback, employees may become aware of the formulaic approach. Once they do so, the praise could be completely dismissed as a disingenuous lead in to criticism. If this happens, there can be a significant loss of trust between the recipient and the person giving feedback.

Ultimately, the Feedback Sandwich may be more effective as a way of making the feedback conversation easier for the person who has to give constructive feedback, by beginning and ending on a positive note, than making it more beneficial for the recipient. [1]

Conclusion

Whether you choose to follow a predefined model or not, knowing the salient factors that make feedback effective and useful for the recipient should make you more confident in approaching the conversation. Remember that your objective is to help the other person improve or build on their strengths, so try to choose the approach which you think will best achieve those aims. Once you have finished a feedback session, you may also find it useful to assess how it went and examine how well your approach worked, using the attached *Evaluating the Feedback Process* worksheet. This may help you identify ways to improve your delivery in future.

[1] C.W. Von Bergen, Martin S. Bressler & Kitty Campbell, 'The Sandwich Feedback Method: Not Very Tasty', *Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business*, Volume 7 (September 2014). Available at: <http://aabri.com/manuscripts/141831.pdf>