



WITH
FACILITATOR'S
GUIDE

TEAMS AT WORK GIVING DIFFICULT FEEDBACK



**Harvard
Business
Review**

Facilitator's Guide

Use this collection of Harvard Business Review content to help your team develop the skills they need to deliver difficult feedback confidently and effectively.

Delivering feedback can be difficult when it is corrective (also called “negative” or “constructive” feedback), or because of the personality of the person receiving it (they tend to get defensive, or they are typically high achievers). This Teams at Work toolkit enables you to teach your team techniques that make corrective feedback easier for the recipient to hear, understand, and implement.

THIS TEAMS AT WORK TOOLKIT INVOLVES TWO PHASES:

1. **Prereading.** 45 min. You'll share the attached reading list and links with your team. There is about three-quarters of an hour's worth of material.
2. **Lead a team discussion.** 1 hr. You'll host a 1-hour meeting with your staff to discuss the material, do an activity, and record what you've learned together. All the materials you need to lead this meeting are in this document, culminating in the Discussion Guide on page 6.

THESE ARE THE MATERIALS INCLUDED IN THIS TEAMS AT WORK TOOLKIT:

0. **Facilitator's Guide** (this document)
1. **Video:** “Give Your Team More Negative Feedback” (about 1 min.)
2. **Article:** “How to Give Tough Feedback That Helps People Grow,” Monique Valcour (4pp)
3. **Article:** “A Better Way to Deliver Bad News,” Jean-François Manzoni (9pp)
4. **Worksheet:** Feedback Planning Worksheet (3pp)
5. **Tool:** Asking the Right Questions (3pp)

We recommend that you print out this facilitator's guide so you can complete the checklists for each section and have a physical copy to use as you lead the discussion. You and your participants can print out the readings if you prefer physical copies.

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Phase 1

Share Readings with Your Team

It's best if you can introduce this initiative at a team meeting—in person or on a conference call if your team is geographically dispersed. Explain what they'll be doing as part of this exercise, and why it's important. Here is a sample script you can use.

We all struggle with giving feedback at work—especially negative feedback. But it's really important. For those of you with direct reports, it's how we help them develop and grow. And we all need to give feedback to our colleagues (and even our managers) at times, whether they're soliciting our opinion on a project or exhibiting workplace behaviors that need to change. Giving feedback effectively is what allows us to be as successful as we can be as a team and as an organization.

I'd like us to take some time over the next two weeks to learn how we can get better at this critical skill. To do that, we'll be reading some material and watching a short video from Harvard Business Review, and then coming together as a group to discuss the ideas and best practices presented—and how we can apply them to some of the situations we're facing today.

PHASE ONE: SHARE READINGS WITH YOUR TEAM

Once you've introduced the idea, share the content by emailing your team and attaching documents #1–5 in the zip file. Cut and paste or modify the following email script to suit your team's needs.

Hi everyone,

As I mentioned, our team is going to be working on our feedback skills over the next few weeks.

I've listed the materials to review below. All of the items are attached. Feel free to print any of these out or read them on-screen as you prefer. Please bring the hard copies or your laptop to our meeting so you can access them.

I'm going to set up a meeting in about two weeks for us to go over this material, so watch for an invitation.

Please let me know if you have any questions in the meantime.

Thanks,

[Your name]

1. **Video:** "Give Your Team More Negative Feedback" (about 1 min.). This video introduces the idea that your colleagues may actually *want* you to give them corrective feedback—and what it takes to do it well.
2. **Article:** "How to Give Tough Feedback That Helps People Grow," Monique Valcour (4pp). Valcour describes a scenario that features difficult feedback given poorly—and then handled well.
3. **Article:** "A Better Way to Deliver Bad News," Jean-François Manzoni (9pp). By taking a more open approach to giving feedback, you can ensure that it's actually heard and acted upon.
4. **Worksheet:** Feedback Planning Worksheet (3pp). This is a form you can use to prepare for a potentially difficult feedback session. We'll use this document in our meeting, but please review it beforehand.
5. **Tool:** Asking the Right Questions (3pp). These questions will spark your own list of queries as you prepare to give difficult feedback. We'll use this document in our meeting, but please review it beforehand.

TIP

You can find this text ready for you to customize, cut, and paste in the document *Sample Emails*.

PHASE ONE: SHARE READINGS WITH YOUR TEAM

Finally, set up the discussion meeting itself. Ideally, you should hold this 1-hour session in person. If that's not possible, make sure that your conferencing system allows for small group work for both the discussion (if you have more than 5 participants) and the activity (in which participants will be paired off).

HAVE YOU:

- Introduced this initiative to your team?
- Sent the email describing the reading list, with the readings attached?
- Set up a meeting time for your discussion?
- Planned the logistics for small group/pairs work, if the meeting will be held virtually?

Phase 2

Lead Your Team Discussion

PREPARE FOR THE DISCUSSION MEETING

Read the materials and watch the video, just as you've asked your team to do. This will help you lead the conversation—and learn from it yourself. Send a reminder to your team to make sure that nobody forgets and is left out of the conversation.

In the days before the discussion meeting, also familiarize yourself with the Discussion Guide (next page) so that you are fully prepared to lead the meeting and facilitate your group's participation.

If your meeting will be held in person, print out copies of the **Feedback Planning Worksheet** and **Asking the Right Questions** tool for each participant; if not, suggest that participants have them handy, either in print or electronically.

HAVE YOU:

- Reviewed the reading materials?
- Sent a reminder to your team that they need to have completed all the prereading in advance of the meeting?
- Looked over the Discussion Guide so you are well prepared and know what to expect?
- Printed copies of the **Feedback Planning Worksheet** and **Asking the Right Questions** tool?

Discussion Guide

BEGIN THE MEETING—5 MINUTES

Open the meeting by thanking your team for taking the time to do the reading, and in advance for their participation in the conversation. Remind them that the goal of this work is for them to be better equipped to give difficult feedback well, so they are less nervous about it and so that it will be more effective.

Set Ground Rules

A discussion about giving feedback when other team members are in the room can be sensitive. Remind your team that your discussion should be considered confidential—if the performance or behavior of a colleague is discussed, don't repeat it.

GENERAL DISCUSSION—20 MINUTES

If your team has more than 15 members, have participants break into groups of 5–6 for this discussion portion. If you are using small groups, move from group to group to help prompt the conversation.

Here are questions to ask, along with possible answers:

- 1. What do you find most difficult about giving feedback? What are the emotions you feel when you give difficult feedback to either your direct reports or your colleagues? Were you surprised that the video revealed that many people like receiving negative feedback?**
 - Participants will share their own feelings and stories.
- 2. Have you ever received *narrow* feedback? What did it feel like?**
 - *Narrow* feedback is feedback in which the giver has leapt to a conclusion about the root cause of the issue at hand.
 - Participants will share their own feelings and stories.

TIP

Note that the times listed are only estimates.

TIP

If participants are hesitant to contribute to the discussion, don't be afraid to call on individuals by name. You can begin with an observation or compliment, like, "Maya, I know you have an especially good relationship with your direct reports. Do you ever find it difficult to give constructive feedback?"

3. What are some of the things that the human resources person did in “How to Give Tough Feedback That Helps People Grow” that made MJ feel so much better about their interaction?

- Acknowledged MJ’s under-the-surface feelings
- Didn’t make MJ go first—said “If it were me, I might be feeling x, y, or z. Are any of these true for you?”
- Didn’t start with what MJ had done wrong
- Worked toward genuine dialogue
- Displayed an intention to help MJ grow, rather than show her she was wrong: coaching versus reprimanding
- Aimed to increase, not undermine, motivation
- Acted open and comfortable—your direct report will sense and mirror discomfort
- Invited the employee into the problem-solving process: What ideas do you have? What are you taking away from this conversation? What steps will you take, by when, and how will I know?
- Opened a space for MJ to participate

4. Reflecting on past situations in which you’ve given feedback, and the article “A Better Way to Deliver Bad News,” what biases do you think tend to cloud your assumptions about the cause of the issue?

- Fundamental attribution error (we grab the first acceptable answer instead of trying to get to the right one)
- False consensus effect (we assume others see situations as we do, fail to revise our framing)

5. What themes and techniques were echoed throughout the readings?

- Employees receive feedback better when they feel heard
- Ask questions
- Don’t avoid giving negative feedback or try to soften it
- Openness on the part of the feedback giver

TIP

To put participants at ease, consider sharing a story about difficult feedback from your own experience. It’s best to think back to a previous position or company, so as not to compromise confidential information.

FEEDBACK PREPARATION ACTIVITY—30 MINUTES

Divide the group into pairs for the following activity.

Plan a Feedback Conversation—5 minutes

Have participants think of a situation that they are facing now (or have faced recently) in which they have to give difficult feedback. Have them complete the **Feedback Planning Worksheet** for that situation. They can use the **Asking the Right Questions** tool to help with the “Questions to ask” query in the worksheet.

Role Play with a Partner—5-7 minutes each

For each pair, one person should explain the situation briefly to their partner, and then role play, pretending that their partner is the person they need to give feedback to. Once they’ve finished, their partner should give feedback on their approach.

Debrief—10 minutes

Bring the group back together. Ask:

- What were some of the things you feel you got right? Things your partner identified that may have surprised you?
- Are there patterns to that feedback across the group? What are our challenges or blind spots as a group when it comes to giving feedback well?
- How can we support each other when giving difficult feedback going forward?

WRAP-UP—5 MINUTES

Taking notes on a whiteboard, ask the group:

- What are some particularly useful strategies, tactics, or ideas you’ve learned today?
- What questions on the Feedback Planning Worksheet worked for you and which didn’t? How can we modify this worksheet to better meet our needs?

TIP

While groups are discussing, circulate and ask each group if there are any questions you can answer.

TIP

Wear a watch or bring another timepiece to the meeting. It makes it easier to closely monitor the time and ensure that your group completes the exercise.

Follow-Up

After the meeting, share the ideas and concepts your group captured and encourage them to use what they've learned in future feedback conversations. Also include your revised Feedback Planning Worksheet.

Here is a script for your follow-up email:

Hi everyone,

Thank you again for participating in our program on giving difficult feedback. Here are some of the tactics we came up with together to improve our feedback skills, as well as a copy of our revised Feedback Planning Worksheet. Please start to use these now, and we will check in in the future to see how we're all doing.

Thanks,

[Your name]

Check in in about a month to see how people have used what they learned, either in a one-on-one or at a team meeting. What has worked? What do they still need help with? Encourage your team members to share best practices with each other.

TIP

You can find this text ready for you to customize, cut, and paste in the document *Sample Emails*.

FURTHER READING

If your team is interested in pursuing this topic further, here are some other resources:

VIDEO

“Get Better at Receiving Feedback” (about 6 min.). The flip side of the issue. By describing our barriers to receiving feedback well, this video also can help those looking to make their own feedback easier to accept—and more effective.

ARTICLES

“The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome” (15pp). A classic *Harvard Business Review* article that describes how managers fall into a negative feedback spiral with their direct reports—and how to avoid it.

“Giving Feedback That Sticks” (2pp). A framework to use when you deliver feedback to make it clear that you are an ally, not an adversary.

“Giving a High Performer Productive Feedback” (2pp). Advice specifically for managers of stars.

“A Six-Part Structure for Giving Clear and Actionable Feedback” (2pp). Six questions to ask your direct reports regularly to help keep them on track in their professional development.

BOOK

HBR Guide to Delivering Effective Feedback (192pp). Whether you’re commending exemplary work or addressing problem behavior, the *HBR Guide to Delivering Effective Feedback* provides you with practical advice and tips to transform any performance discussion—from weekly check-ins to annual reviews—into an opportunity for growth and development.

HAVE YOU:

- Followed up with your team to send them the group takeaways from the meeting, as well as the revised **Feedback Planning Worksheet**?
- Put a reminder in your calendar to check in with the team in about a month?
- Shared further reading resources with your team?

TIP

You can find this text ready for you to customize, cut, and paste in the document *Sample Emails*.

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Product #TWFBK1.

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