



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H029QB
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
AUGUST 11, 2015

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Over the years, I've asked hundreds of executive students what skills they believe are essential for leaders. "The ability to give tough feedback" comes up frequently. But what exactly is "tough feedback"? The phrase connotes bad news, like when you have to tell a team member that they've screwed up on something important. Tough also signifies the way we think we need to be when giving negative feedback: firm, resolute, and unyielding.

But "tough" also points to the discomfort some of us experience when giving negative feedback, and to the challenge of doing so in a way that motivates change instead of making the other person feel defensive. Managers fall into a number of common traps. We might be angry at an employee and use the feedback conversation to blow off steam rather than to coach. Or we may delay giving needed feedback because we anticipate that the employee will become argumentative and refuse to accept responsibility. We might try surrounding negative feedback with positive feedback, like a bitter-tasting pill in a

spoonful of honey. But this approach is misguided, because we don't want the negative feedback to

slip by unnoticed in the honey. Instead, it's essential to create conditions in which the receiver can take in feedback, reflect on it, and learn from it.

To get a feel for what this looks like in practice, I juxtapose two feedback conversations that occurred following a workplace conflict. MJ Paulitz, a physical therapist in the Pacific Northwest, was treating a hospital patient one day when a fellow staff member paged her. Following procedure, she excused herself and stepped out of the treatment room to respond to the page. The colleague who sent it didn't answer her phone when MJ called, nor had she left a message describing the situation that warranted the page. This happened two more times during the same treatment session. The third time she left her patient to respond to the page, MJ lost her cool and left an angry voicemail message for her colleague. Upset upon hearing the message, the staff member reported it to their supervisor as abusive.

MJ's first feedback session took place in her supervisor's office. She recalls, "When I went into his office, he had already decided that I was the person at fault, he had all the information he needed, and he wasn't interested in hearing my side of the story. He did not address the three times she pulled me out of patient care. He did not acknowledge that that might have been the fuse that set me off." Her supervisor referred MJ to the human resources department for corrective action. She left seething with a sense of injustice.

MJ describes the subsequent feedback conversation with human resources as transformative. "The woman in HR could see that I had a lot of just-under-the-surface feelings, and she acknowledged them. The way she did it was genius: she eased into it. She didn't make me go first. Instead, she said, 'I can only imagine what you're feeling right now. Here you are in my office, in corrective action. If it were me, I might be feeling angry, frustrated, embarrassed... Are any of these true for you?' That made a huge difference."

With trust established, MJ was ready to take responsibility for her behavior and commit to changing it. Next the HR person said, "Now let's talk about how you reacted to those feelings in the moment." She created a space that opened up a genuine dialogue.

The subsequent conversation created powerful learning that has stuck with MJ to this day. "Oftentimes when we're feeling a strong emotion, we go down what the HR person called a "cowpath," because it's well worn, very narrow, and always leads to the same place. Let's say you're angry. What do you do? You blow up. It's okay that you feel those things; it's just not okay to blow up. She asked me to think about what I could do to get on a different path."

"The feedback from the HR person helped me learn to find the space between what I'm feeling and the next thing that slides out of my mouth. She gave me the opportunity to grow internally. What made it work was establishing a safe space, trust, and rapport, and then getting down to 'you need to change' — rather than starting with 'you need to change,' which is what my supervisor did. I did need to change; that was the whole point of the corrective action. But she couldn't start there, because I

would have become defensive, shut down and not taken responsibility. I still to this day think that my co-worker should have been reprimanded. But I also own my part in it. I see that I went down that cowpath, and I know that I won't do it a second time.”

The difference in the two feedback sessions illustrated above boils down to coaching, which deepens self-awareness and catalyzes growth, versus reprimanding, which sparks self-protection and avoidance of responsibility. To summarize, powerful, high-impact feedback conversations share the following elements:

1. An intention to help the employee grow, rather than to show him he was wrong. The feedback should increase, not drain, the employee's motivation and resources for change. When preparing for a feedback conversation as a manager, reflect on what you hope to achieve and on what impact you'd like to have on the employee, perhaps by doing a short [meditation](#) just before the meeting.
2. Openness on the part of the feedback giver, which is essential to creating a [high-quality connection](#) that facilitates change. If you start off feeling uncomfortable and self-protective, your employee will match that energy, and you'll each leave the conversation frustrated with the other person.
3. Inviting the employee into the problem-solving process. You can ask questions such as: 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?

Giving developmental feedback that sparks growth is a critical challenge to master, because it can make the difference between an employee who contributes powerfully and positively to the organization and one who feels diminished by the organization and contributes far less. A single conversation can switch an employee on – or shut her down. A true developmental leader sees the raw material for brilliance in every employee and creates the conditions to let it shine, even when the challenge is tough.

Monique Valcour is an executive coach and management academic. Her coaching, research, and consulting help companies and individuals craft high-performance, meaningful jobs, careers, workplaces, and lives. Follow her on Twitter [@moniquevalcour](#).
