GETTING FEEDBACK RIGHT

HOW TO BUILD A HEALTHY FEEDBACK ENVIRONMENT

ART PETTY

THE GUIDE FOR GETTING FEEDBACK RIGHT

What You'll Discover in This Guide:

01. Why Feedback is "Bad"

02. How to Learn to Master Feedback

03. The One Bad Habit You Must Give Up with Your Feedback Discussions

04. Groups and Teams Need Love and Feedback Too

05. How to Strengthen Your Feedback Skills Starting Right Now

WELCOME

Thanks for downloading our guide! It took me more than a few years to realize I needed help with feedback. Before seeking some training and coaching, my feedback discussions were either verbal sparring events or extended psychotherapy sessions where I was practicing without a license. They weren't good.

Ultimately, developing my feedback skills proved to be one of the best investments I made in my managerial and leadership career. **Learning to conduct robust discussions respectfully and in a way that promoted growth and performance proved game-changing for me.**

To this day, I'm convinced my ability to help individuals develop and grow and teams perform via feedback contributed tremendously to my success and the success of my teams.

As I pivoted to my post-corporate life serving as an executive coach, strategy consultant, and author, I was reminded by an unlikely source just how essential feedback skills are to all of us in our careers. I was working on my first book, Practical Lessons in Leadership, and I was honored to interview "Ron," a retired CEO. The interview had gone great. Ron offered some excellent guidance for my emerging leader target audience, and almost as an after-thought, I asked him if he had any regrets from his leadership career. His answer floored me!
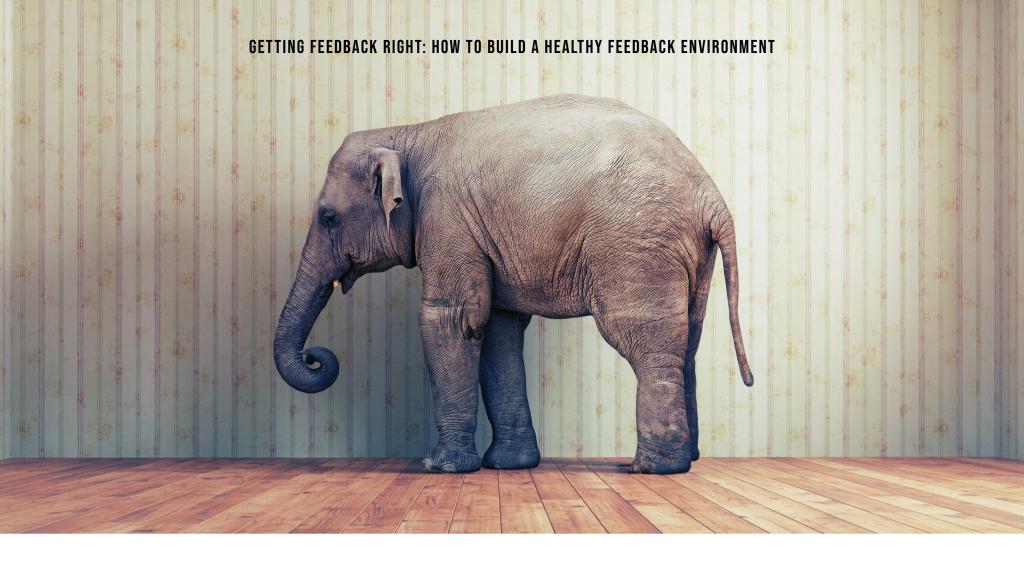
"Art, I wish I had learned to master the art of tough discussions. I never felt I was good at those and I wonder to this day how much performance and money I left on the table."

 Wow! :)

While I understood the importance of developing great feedback skills from my own experience, I think it was Ron's thoughtful comment that inspired me to write dozens of "How To" articles and to deliver workshops and online programs workshops on how to provide quality feedback.

Over time, I've had the great pleasure of teaching, coaching and training what is cumulatively thousands of professionals on getting feedback right. This e-book is another extension of that mission. Use the ideas and approaches in great career and performance health!

Art

LET'S TACKLE THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM...

OK, maybe tackling the elephant is a bad plan—elephants are big and hard to tackle—so, let's address the real issue first.

There are a lot of problems with feedback.

For starters, the most recent studies suggest not only that we don't like feedback and that we will literally adjust our social interactions in the workplace by avoiding those who gave us constructive (the negative type) feedback.

Other studies suggest just the idea of giving or receiving feedback is enough to trigger reactions in our brains associated with fear. You know, fight or flight type reactions.

Mix in some poor experiences you've likely had either as a giver or receiver of feedback, and it's no wonder this communication tool gets a bad rap.

There's no shortage of reasons why feedback is bad.

Except, if you've got the right people working in a healthy environment, quality feedback is literally rocket fuel for high performance.

You see, good people—the type you want to work around and with and have on your team—want feedback. They want a lot of the right kind of feedback, and most of them aren't getting enough right now.

And while the right feedback at the right time is indeed rocket fuel, learning to master feedback (receiving & giving) isn't rocket science.

Here's how...

01

FIRST AND FOREMOST, BUILD TRUST

Teaching you how to use the tools and apply the processes essential for creating quality feedback discussions is relatively easy. Creating an environment where feedback isn't something that triggers fight-or-flight reactions is a bit more challenging.

Let's do the heavy lifting first.

Trust is the foundation of useful feedback. If people don't trust that you have their best interests and safety at heart, they won't trust you to give them feedback—either the positive or constructive kind.

In studies of leadership in extremis situations (in dangerous situations), the research shows individuals decide to trust their leaders based on three criteria:

- ARE THEY COMPETENT AT THEIR JOB?
- DO THEY DO WHAT THEY SAY?
- DO THEY HAVE MY SAFETY AND SECURITY AS A TOP PRIORITY?

If any of these three are missing from the equation, trust is nowhere to be found, and communication exchanges—especially feedback discussions—are awkward, incomplete, and stressful.

Note: Notice that "liking" isn't part of the list. People don't need to like you, and you don't need to like them to respect them. Too many managers avoid delivering feedback because they're worried people won't like them because of it. Get over it. Reasonable people will appreciate you for your courage and honesty in helping them develop.

While your workplace may not be as dangerous as those who fight forest fires or engage in other hazardous situations, the needs are the same.

If people cannot answer those three questions above in the affirmative when it comes to working with you, it's unlikely you will create an environment where feedback serves as a performance tool.

Feedback only works when trust is present and mutual.

Work on trust first.

YEARS AGO, I WAS PART OF A SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM THAT WAS STRUGGLING TO HELP THE FIRM REALIZE ITS POTENTIAL. AFTER SPENDING TIME WITH US, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OFFERED: "YOU PEOPLE DON'T TRUST EACH OTHER ENOUGH TO HAVE THE TOUGH CONVERSATIONS."

HE WAS RIGHT.

PRACTICE "SWIFT TRUST" TO BUILD A QUALITY FEEDBACK CULTURE

02

REMEMBER, TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION OF A HEALTHY FEEDBACK CULTURE. IF WE DON'T TRUST THE PERSON GIVING US FEEDBACK WE'LL SHRUG OFF THE INPUT.

So, the solution is simple—change the way you cultivate trust with your colleagues and team members.

Let's start with the reality that we take our time before we decide to trust someone. We like proof that someone is worth trusting. After all, if we choose to trust someone, we effectively agree to make ourselves vulnerable to them.

That's uncomfortable.

Our typical approach to trusting someone is to make sure over time they earn our trust through repeated examples. Once we've reached the point where we decide to open ourselves to them, a great deal of time has gone by.

Your challenge is to shrink the time-to-trust (TTR).

TTR is a leading indicator of group and team performance. The faster the group gets to trust; the faster performance can emerge.

The best way to reduce the TTR is to practice "Swift Trust."

Just as the label implies, you need to start new relationships as a boss or team member by trusting people before they've officially earned your trust through repeated examples.

Something interesting happens when you openly display your trust early in a relationship.

People trust you back.

And yes, there's another elephant in this trust-room. Someone will burn you at some point in time. If you're the boss, that's a priceless insight into the individual's character. You can adjust your approach from that point forward. Deal with it when it happens. Just don't assume everyone is guilty until proven innocent.

IMPROVE FEEDBACK'S VALUE BY LISTENING HARDER AS A RECEIVER

03

Few of us relish moments in time when someone suggests we need to change the way we're doing something. You're human if your first momentary reaction feels a bit like frustration or even anger.

You need to learn to control that initial reaction.

Great feedback starts with you learning to become great at receiving feedback.

Sure, I understand you might not trust the person. We talked about this earlier. I still want you to listen.

Listen so hard that you're exhausted from listening.

Most people have never been trained to deliver quality feedback. As a result, they muddle, mutilate, or massacre these discussions. Yet, there may be nuggets of gold in these messes somewhere. It's your job to mine for the nuggets of gold.

01. Pay attention. Shut down your natural inclination to be thinking of responses while the other person is talking.

02. Ask clarifying questions until you get to the root behavior. And then ask how you might do things differently next time. And then do it. Remember, feedback is about strengthening performance: yours and theirs.

03. Practice what you preach. Your hard work listening and working to find the value in feedback are behaviors you want to model to your team members and colleagues. Remember, people are looking to see if your do matches your tell. Start by strengthening as a receiver of feedback.

BOB PREACHED A GOOD GAME WHEN IT CAME TO FEEDBACK. HE REGULARLY EXTOLLED THE VIRTUES OF FEEDBACK RIGHT BEFORE HE SHREDDED THE PERSON IN FRONT OF HIM. "IT'S FOR YOUR BENEFIT."

WHEN SOMEONE OFFERED SOME FEEDBACK TO BOB, THE MESSENGER ENDED UP EXILED TO NO-ONE'S LAND. FROM THAT POINT ON, NO ONE GAVE BOB FEEDBACK.

THE DO DIDN'T MATCH THE TELL, AND BOB'S REPUTATION AS A MANAGER NEVER RECOVERED.

LEARN THE RECIPE FOR QUALITY FEEDBACK AND PROSPER

04

I like to experiment with recipes when I'm cooking. Yet, when I've achieved one that is just right and even perfect for my tastes, I lock it down. The recipe for quality feedback is one that needs to be locked down. You can experiment in the discussions, but if you miss one of the key ingredients in the feedback recipe, quality takes a hit.

THE KEY INGREDIENTS IN EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK DISCUSSIONS:

01. **Behavioral Focus.** Effective feedback is behavioral in nature. Instead of focusing on something intangible like a perceived attitude, it emphasizes specific behaviors that you've observed in the workplace. A simple example: "You really messed that presentation up today," might be true, but it's not behavioral. Describing the areas where the presentation went awry is essential to gaining any future performance improvement from this discussion.

02. **Anchored in a Business Rationale.** If you don't link the behavior to the impact that it has on the business, it comes off like an indictment. Your role is to promote performance towards company or team goals while supporting individual development and performance. When it's presented in the context of a business rationale, it's perceived as constructive or supportive.

03. **Candid and Specific.** Don't sugarcoat the issue, don't sandwich it between praise comments (that's for your benefit, not the receivers), and limit the number of behaviors you cover to one per discussion. I overheard a feedback discussion recently where a manager hit an employee with 5 different feedback points in one conversation. The receiver was dizzy from the input and not certain what to do next.

04. Involves Dialog.
The best feedback discussions are just that...two-way discussions. These aren't opportunities for you to verbally machine-gun your employee or show someone who's boss...they are opportunities to strengthen a relationship and find a way forward to improve performance in support of the business.

05. Timely delivery.
For most situations, the closer to the observed behavior you can deliver the feedback, the better the opportunity to promote strengthening or change. While many managers delay these discussions because they are uncomfortable with the idea of "criticizing" an employee, the best feedback is served warm.

Waiting until the annual performance review is lousy feedback. I call this dump truck feedback because you can hear the beeping as the truck backs up and beings to dump everything you did wrong for the last year in one big load of manure. Dump truck feedback stinks.

An exception to the sooner is better rule might be made for an emotionally charged situation where one or both parties are fired up. In this scenario, establish a time for a discussion the next day.

The recipe for effective feedback isn't complicated, but it does require consistent and timely application of the core ingredients.

DON'T FORGET THE DISCUSSION IN FEEDBACK DISCUSSIONS

05

In a recent workshop, one of the participants—a senior manager—delivered feedback brilliantly.

Almost.

She used the ingredients perfectly.

The discussion focused on the behavioral observation.

The behavior tied to business performance.

And instead of preoccupying on the past, she used feed-forward and talked about what the behavior should like in the future.

Last and not least of all, she set up a follow-on date to review performance on the behavioral change.

Brilliant!

Almost!

She forgot one key issue. Quality feedback sessions are always discussions. She did everything right but get the individual involved in discussing the behavior and defining the improvement.

When I pointed this out to her, it was like the lights turned on.

She reported back recently that her feedback discussions are now true discussions where everyone works on designing the behavioral change game plan.

Now, that's brilliant!

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THE ONE BAD HABIT YOU MUST GIVE UP WITH YOUR FEEDBACK DISCUSSIONS

THE PRAISE SANDWICH

FEW TOPICS CREATE MORE DEBATE IN MY WORKSHOPS THAN THIS ONE.

Somewhere, someone wrote a book or created a course and suggested that constructive feedback discussions (the negative kind) should be preceded and concluded with positive praise.

I call it the praise-sandwich.

Positive, constructive, positive.

That's a horrible plan. (This is where the discussions go off the ledge.)

Here's the common push-back: "But Art, I want them to feel valued, and I want to give them positive feedback."

I love those objectives. You should make people genuinely feel valued. And you should absolutely give them ample helpings of well-earned, quality positive praise! My suggestion is a minimum ratio of 3:1 positive to constructive feedback.

You don't need to justify your appreciation or, provide your positive feedback in the same discussion as the constructive feedback.

Blending positive praise with quality constructive input confuses the receiver.

"Am I being praised or criticized?"

Mostly, we hear the positives.

The constructive content gets watered down.

Remember the purpose of feedback?

The purpose of feedback is to strengthen those behaviors that contribute to high-performance or change those behaviors that detract from high-performance. When you're delivering constructive feedback, you're focused on the second half of that definition.

- **ENSURE THE DISCUSSION IS TIMELY.**
- **MAKE THE BEHAVIOR BEING DISCUSSED CRYSTAL CLEAR.**
- **HIGHLIGHT THE DIRECT IMPACT OF THE BEHAVIOR ON PERFORMANCE.**
- **PROMOTE A DIALOG ON STRENGTHENING THE BEHAVIOR IN THE FUTURE.**
- **AND LIMIT EVERY FEEDBACK DISCUSSION TO JUST ONE BEHAVIOR.**

That's it. on Just one behavior.
And give a lot of positive feedback. Just give it separately from your constructive feedback discussions.

GROUPS AND TEAMS NEED LOVE AND FEEDBACK TOO

GROUPS & TEAMS

If you study the science and art of creating high-performance teams, coaching is one of the five top critical components necessary for success.

Feedback is part of coaching.

The same rules apply, although the areas where you observe teams are around discussion quality, ideation activities, problem-solving, and decision-making.

EVERY TEAM NEEDS HELP LEARNING TO TALK, IDEATE, PROBLEM-SOLVE, AND DECIDE.

Great teams consume feedback in pursuit of strengthening performance in these areas.

They recognize what leadership guru Ken Blanchard has long preached: "Feedback is the breakfast of champions."

Sadly, most teams don't receive much coaching or feedback.

The potential for high-performance is a horrible thing to waste when it comes to your teams.
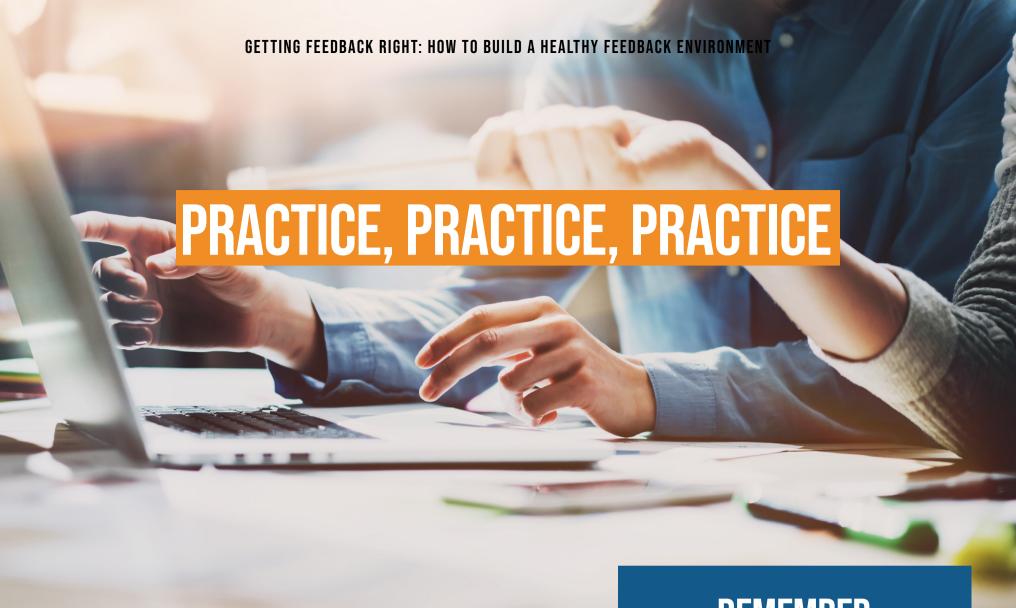
Coach and give your teams feedback!

They'll thank you later.

SIDEBAR:

In the debrief of a significant software development initiative, the team members described timely, clear feedback on decision-making and ideation processes as critical contributors to their success.

"If we didn't have regular feedback on how to improve our communication processes, we would have driven this project right into the ditch," said one key contributor.

HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR FEEDBACK SKILLS STARTING RIGHT NOW

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

There's an old musician's joke. A musician was carrying her instrument down 5th Avenue in New York and needed directions to Carnegie Hall. She stopped a passerby and asked, "Ma'am, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

The lady thought about it for a second, looked at her and responded, "Practice, practice, practice."

OK, it might not make the late night circuit, but the lesson is clear.

The only way to get better at receiving and delivering feedback is to practice.

The great news, there are ample opportunities every single day to hone your skills and try new approaches.

And yes, you'll make mistakes.

People will turn feedback discussions around on you. (That's always awkward.)

Sometimes people react emotionally. You may be at fault here.

Strive to improve in every discussion.

However, if you've done what I've suggested here and cultivated trust, all you need is the right ingredients.

REMEMBER:

- Excellent quality feedback is timely, observed, behavioral, specific, and tied to performance.

- How you open the discussion is critical. Pre-write your opening sentence, and as needed, practice it several times.

- Deliver feedback respectfully, focusing on improving behaviors that strengthen the business, team, or overall performance.

- Promote honest, open discussions about behaviors.

- Deliver positive feedback in at least a 3:1 ratio to constructive feedback.

- Don't sandwich your feedback.

- Work hard to model the behaviors of great feedback receivers because they know the do must match the tell.

LET'S WRAP UP...

Feedback is a powerful performance strengthening tool and the means by which we all learn and grow. Developing your comfort with and confidence for delivering feedback of all types is an essential part of your growth as a leader and as a professional.

In reality, experienced feedback masters understand there are a few key rules and a simple process for navigating the feedback challenge and strengthening their performance as leaders. It starts with you putting in some time, exploring the components and tools of effective feedback and then practicing the skills daily.

There's no time like the present to start!

SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

If you're looking for additional resources on overcoming your fear of giving feedback, planning your discussions, and more, visit my feedback and challenging conversations categories on the blog.

And don't forget to practice, practice, practice!

ABOUT ART PETTY

Art Petty is an executive and emerging leader coach and longtime software industry executive.

Art works with professionals from CEOs and emerging executives to front-line leaders and new managers in private and public sectors as a coach and trainer.

Art writes the popular Management Excellence blog and Leadership Caffeine articles, and he's written three leadership books and numerous e-books. His books, training development and online learning programs serve as resources for firms in manufacturing, technology, defense, services, healthcare, and for state agencies as well as agencies in the federal government.

Clients credit Art with helping them reconceive their strategies and their approaches to leading and operating through his ability to ask and help them find the answers to the difficult questions that derail most teams. Art attributes his success to his sheer passion for the pursuit of high performance with and through others and to his focus on practicing and perpetuating values-based leadership.