

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 6: HOW TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Moving from the U.S. to Belgium when I was 25 came with many culture shock moments. But my favorite “Dorothy, we are not in Kansas anymore” moments came when I went up to the Netherlands to visit my company’s service facility. I was the new HR person responsible for that facility, and I was going to introduce myself to the team there. Basically, the plan was to give a little update presentation about the company’s HR strategy, but then spend a lot of time with one-on-one meetings.

In the beginning everything went according to plan. The presentation went great (from my perspective), and I was starting my first meeting with a service technician. Almost immediately after introducing ourselves, he told me bluntly that he did not like the previous HR person, and that he didn’t really trust me. He hadn’t received a lot of support or value from the HR partners in the past, and I would be no different. Not surprisingly I was a little caught off guard, but what actually surprised me was how he delivered the message. He wasn’t mad or frustrated when he spoke. He was pleasant and just presented his opinions as if they were facts that I needed to learn.

It was only weeks after that meeting that I was told this is a frequent occurrence in Dutch culture. When they have feedback for you, they tell you in a very direct and blunt manner. While it feels like they are smacking you in the face with their feedback, they aren’t doing it to be mean. They just want you to know how they are feeling. Over time, I came to appreciate this direct style of feedback, especially when I compared it to some of my Asian colleagues. If I hurt their feelings or did something wrong, they never told me. I would get a sense of something not being right between us, but I struggled to know what it was.

Due to these kinds of stereotypical “fish out of water” experiences, I started to study how the different cultures around the world worked together. Each culture had their own preferences for leadership, debating ideas, making decisions, and even how we build trust. But as I studied my cultural differences, I realized something important. I was not the stereotypical ambassador for America, and the people I met did not always match their cultural stereotypes. So, I pushed myself to think past the cultural stereotypes and form relationships based on their individual preferences. Gone were the days I assumed we preferred the same way of working together.

And now I want to share my lessons with you. Over a series of seven articles, I have been sharing the different dimensions of collaboration and leadership, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life. This is the sixth article of the seven, and it is focused on how people prefer to give and receive feedback.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? - Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to time when it comes to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Timelines vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer’s book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all of your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a mountain of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

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Dimension 6 - How Do We Prefer to Give And Receive Feedback?

Feedback is the fuel for building a strong collaboration and, ultimately, a healthy performing team. If you don't do it, you risk not only demotivating your teammates and colleagues, but you hinder their ability to perform to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, giving enough feedback is something many companies struggle with. 65% of employees say they need more feedback in their jobs, and 39% feel they are unappreciated at work. While part of the problem is caused by all of us not giving enough feedback, another issue stems from how we prefer to give and receive feedback. These differences can cause confusion or hurt feelings between colleagues.

On one side of the feedback spectrum are the people that prefer to give Direct feedback. They share their feedback in a straightforward and honest manner. They will tell you if something is great, but they will also tell you if they think it is crap. They also don't mix messages that often. For example, they will not include positive feedback as a way to soften negative feedback. They will just share the negative feedback. People with this Direct style believe they are helping the other person by providing this type of feedback, and they expect their colleagues to do the same back to them.

On the other side of the spectrum are people that prefer a more Indirect style of feedback. They still want to give feedback, but they prefer to do it in a more subtle and diplomatic manner. While a Direct feedback giver might give negative feedback publicly, the Indirect feedback giver would never do that. These types of people focus more on how the person feels when receiving the message, and not necessarily if the message was 100% understood. In this manner, they will often use positive messages to soften negative messages, or even just allude to the negative messages.

It is important to recognize that both styles of feedback have their strengths and weaknesses. One type is not better than the other type. But problems arise when people with different styles work together, and don't recognize that the other person prefers a different style of feedback. That is why we recommend everyone be clear on what style of feedback they prefer. While you might already have a good idea on your preference for feedback, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the below questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for a Direct or Indirect approach to giving and receiving feedback.

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|--|--|--|-------------------------|--|--|
| 1) I appreciated directness when it comes to feedback. I will tell you if I think something is great, and I will tell you if I think something is bad. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 2) I believe that giving feedback to someone in front of the team can sometimes benefit the whole team, as it helps the rest of the team also learn from the feedback. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 3) When giving feedback to someone, I want to make sure they are in the right mental and emotional states to process the feedback, and if they aren't I will wait in give it to them. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 4) I prefer that people come to the realization of negative performance themselves. So instead of telling them directly, I lightly highlight some of the issues and then let them come to the conclusion themselves. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for giving and receiving Feedback. | High Preference for Direct Feedback | Slight Preference for Direct Feedback | Mixed Preference | Slight Preference for Indirect Feedback | High Preference for Indirect Feedback |

Collaborating With People With Different Feedback Styles

It goes without saying that if both you and the other person have a Direct approach to feedback, then collaborating will be easier (if not brutally honest). Similarly, if you both have the Indirect approach, you will have an easier time providing feedback. But what do you do if you prefer to give Indirect feedback while the other person prefers a more Direct approach? Or what about the reverse? Don't worry... effectively working with people with different feedback styles is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

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What you should do if you prefer a more Direct approach to feedback and the other person prefers a more Indirect approach:

- **Choose the right location for feedback** - People that prefer an Indirect approach to feedback would never

imagine giving or receiving negative feedback in a public setting. If you have some constructive feedback you need to deliver, do not do it in a team setting. Talk with the person privately. We also recommend choosing a more neutral setting for the message, like over lunch. Calling the person into the “boss’s” office to give feedback might be too confrontational for them.

- **Be explicit about the good** - One of the best ways to give Indirect feedback is to highlight the positive. For example, if they did two reports (one good and one full of mistakes), don’t spend time highlighting all the mistakes. Instead focus on the good report. Talk about how this was a great report, free of mistakes, and highlight all the positive things about it. By saying one report is great and by not mentioning the other report, the person gets the indirect message that the other report was not as good.

- **Give feedback over time** - Indirect feedback should be something that you give over time. You should introduce the message slowly, and over multiple meetings. While you may think it inefficient to leave a trail of breadcrumbs to your feedback message, the other person would not appreciate a blunter approach. This Indirect approach allows the other person to mentally prepare for the changes that might be coming.

- **Thank them when they give you feedback** - If the other person gives you Direct feedback (which is against their style), make sure you positively receive the message. Even if you disagree with what they are saying, do not act defensively or challenging. Act curiously and ask questions to better understand their perspective. If you react negatively to them giving you feedback, then most likely they will not give you Direct feedback again.

What you should do if you prefer an Indirect approach to Feedback and the other person prefers a more Direct approach:

- **Be more Direct, but not too Direct** - The other person will want open and Direct feedback from you. They might get frustrated or confused if you are too Indirect with your feedback. So, while it might feel uncomfortable to you, you should attempt to be more Direct. That being said, your goal should be to meet somewhere in the middle, and not fully adapt to their style.

- **Be specific** - The other person will want to hear clear examples in order to know exactly what to change. That is why you should never give feedback using generalities. For example, don’t say things like “you are always late.” Instead focus on specific events. “You were late to these three meetings, and our customers were kept waiting.”

- **Give timely feedback** - Where Indirect feedback givers want to give the message over time, the people with a more Direct approach want to receive feedback immediately. If something happens in a meeting, then they want to know right after the meeting what they did. If you are too Indirect with them, they will feel like you want to tell them something, but just won’t. They will be constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. Don’t keep them waiting. Give them the feedback as soon as you can.

- **Don’t over analyze their messages** - When receiving feedback from a Direct person, don’t try to analyze the message for subtleties or unspoken messages. Listen to and believe that is the message they are trying to deliver. Even if you find the message rude or patronizing, recognize that they are purposefully trying to be very clear. In their mind this kind of honesty is a sign of respect for you.

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Feedback Requires the Right Mindset

When it comes to giving Direct or Indirect feedback, we recommend adopting the following two mindsets.

1. **You are on their side** - Too often people (including myself) will use feedback as a weapon. You angered me, so now I'm going to tell you off. But that kind of weaponized feedback isn't helpful. In fact, it will most likely cause the other person to become defensive or be hurt in the process. Feedback is about helping the other person do more of a good thing or do less of a negative thing. It's about helping them be better, and that requires that we understand their perspective.

2. **Be curious, not judgmental** - As you prepare to give someone feedback, it is easy to believe you know the whole story. You "know" what happened to them, and you "know" what the person should do to solve the problem. But this mindset is a quick way to ignore their perspective. If you truly want to be on their side and avoid weaponizing feedback, then you need to do two things: be curious about their perspective and remove your own negative emotions from the conversation.

Finally, I would like to leave you with one piece of advice. No matter what type of feedback approach you prefer, don't start the conversation by saying "I have some feedback for you." That treats feedback like you telling them something, and not having a conversation with them. We recommend starting the conversation by asking, "Are you open for some feedback?" That way, they have a choice, because sometimes people just aren't in the right mood to hear feedback. If you've just had a big fight with your spouse, then most likely you aren't in the right mindset to get feedback from your boss. So, ask if they are open for some feedback, if they say no, then just ask when a better time would be.

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