

How to give feedback the right way

Giving feedback can be challenging, especially when you have something critical to say. How often do you ponder over saying something or just letting it slide?

Constructive feedback can help your colleagues improve and enrich the relationships in your team. Consequently, it can bring everyone's performance to a higher level. However, feedback only works if the recipients are willing to accept it and work on it, which doesn't happen automatically.

C.O.I.N. -- A FORMULA FOR IMPACTFUL, CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

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Below is a formula for giving feedback, which should help get your message across and more likely to be accepted. Sound like something you want? Then, let's dive in.

You can use this Context - Observation - Impact - Next (C.O.I.N) formula to make both positive and constructive feedback more impactful, but since people find it more challenging to give constructive feedback, this is what we're focusing on.

Let's say that you find one of your colleagues regularly interrupts others and it's starting to cause friction. Other people have mentioned it - and you want to nip it in the bud before it turns into a conflict.

C -- Context

Start by identifying the situation. Give your colleague a reference point: a specific example of when they may have demonstrated the behavior in question. For example, let them know you're specifically referring to what happened during the team meeting the day before, rather than commenting on their general interactions with others (even though you may have more than one example).

"I noticed during yesterday's team meeting"

O -- Observation

Describe the behavior in a clear and objective manner. Focus on the actions that your colleague took, and not on their personality.

For example you may say

"... you were so excited about the topic we were discussing that you interrupted Mark and Julie several times each."

I -- Impact

Help your colleague understand why you're commenting on this behavior by describing its impact. The behavior may impact one or several people, or even an entire team.

In the above example, the act of interrupting repeatedly affects Mark & Julie's contribution to the discussion. It may give them the impression that their contributions are not valued. It also has an effect on other participants who were listening to Mark or Julie and compromises the flow of the meeting. Think of the big picture, and choose the impact that is most relevant to mention.

For example, the impact is bigger when you talk about the effect on the group.

"After you interrupted Mark, the meeting was sidetracked. It would have been better to wait until we had finished the discussion and then plan a new meeting around the point you raised."

N -- Next

Now that you've got through the difficult part of giving the feedback, don't forget to offer some suggestions of what they could do to improve. What could they do differently next time?

For example:

"Maybe next time you could give whoever's speaking more time to elaborate on what they mean so we can all understand their point of view. Ask yourself whether what you want to say will build on the discussion or be more disruptive than necessary."

So next time you're about to give feedback repeat to yourself:

Beyond the content of the feedback, how you say it is just as important. The way you bring your message across has a significant effect on how it will be perceived, so be sure to choose your language appropriately.

HOW YOU SAY IT IS JUST AS IMPORTANT

Here are a few tips about form your feedback, whether you are giving it in writing or face to face.

1. Offer suggesting statements

There are three styles you can adopt when giving your opinion:

- In a strong statement: I think that the implementation was flawed.
- In a question: Do you think there was a flaw with the implementation?
- In a suggestion: I would suggest a few changes to the implementation next time.

Consider what you are most comfortable with, and most importantly the style you think your colleague would respond to best.

2. Avoid "BUT"

Sometimes it's tempting to say: *"I think you did a good job but..."* You may think this is softening the blow, but your colleague might be thinking: *"what's wrong now?"*. This can quickly make people become defensive.

When you want to deliver both positive and constructive comments, try to list your points separately. For example:

“First of all, I have to say that you explained the conditions to the client very thoroughly. Nicely done.

Secondly, it would be better if you try to keep the consulting session a bit more focused. I noted a few details that could be left out, because they were not relevant in this case. I was lost at times.”

3. Use the past tense

You want to refer to a specific behavior in the past. The use of the present tense would imply that your colleague demonstrates this type of behavior all the time, making your feedback sound too generic and you might lose your point.

4. Use verbs

Verbs are better than adjectives because they leave less room for interpretation. For example:

Avoid saying: *“You were rude to a client yesterday.”*

Rather say: *“You raised your voice a few times and used short, snappy sentences with a client yesterday.”*

Remember to use the C.O.I.N model so the person understands why that was an issue.

5. Face to Face: Be conscious of your body language

When you give feedback in person, be aware of your body language. Avoid gestures that might make recipients defensive or anxious.

1. Don't raise your voice: you are not angry, you are giving them feedback to help them improve.
2. Don't cross your arms: you don't want to look closed off to conversation and discussion around the feedback.
3. Don't frown: you are not there to judge but to provide support. Facial expressions can send messages without you even saying anything.

To create an atmosphere of openness, keep a friendly tone and open body language.

In brief

Many people find giving constructive feedback daunting. If you remember to use the C.O.I.N formula, you can ensure you're giving actionable, constructive feedback that will help your peers, manager or direct report improve their performance.

Want to put this into practice? Download a free copy of the C.O.I.N framework poster [here](#)