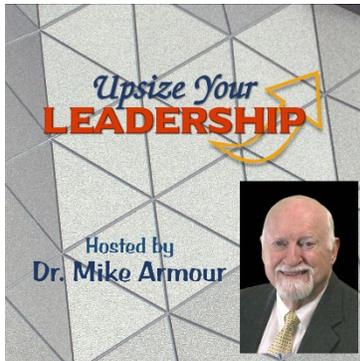


# Feedback Done Right (Part One)

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

## Episode UYL2213

Podcast Date: June 16, 2022



In building a strong team, one of the most important things a leader or manager does is to provide timely feedback to individuals and to the team as a whole. Yet many of the concepts and terms used in describing feedback need to be abandoned. At best they are misleading, and at worst they are counterproductive. Today I want to give you some feedback on feedback.

As a leadership specialist, I'm asked several times a year to train a group of managers on how to give better feedback. What I've learned is that many leaders who are otherwise well-accomplished fall into sub-par performance when it comes to feedback. Either they don't provide it at all or they

don't provide it often enough or they carry it out poorly.

Today I'm tackling the issue of feedback delivered poorly. Step up your game in the feedback arena, and you're sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

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The term "feedback" has its origins in the field of engineering, where feedback systems allow mechanical, electrical, or electronic devices to self-regulate. The thermostat in a heating or cooling system is a good example. It evaluates whether the system is achieving the proper output, then makes input to the system which allows the system to self-correct.

Feedback mechanisms first came into wide-spread use with the dawn of the steam age, particularly with steam locomotives. These feedback devices regulated the amount of steam going into the drive cylinder so that the train's speed stayed within ideal limits, both high and low.

In human systems, feedback should play a similar role. The primary purpose of feedback is not to hold people accountable, although accountability may be part of it. Nor is it to motivate people, although done properly, feedback is highly motivational. No, the primary purpose of feedback is to empower those who receive it to maintain performance at an optimal level. In a word, managerial feedback is information supplied to a living, breathing self-management system to permit it to self-regulate more effectively.

When we approach feedback from this perspective, there is no such thing as "positive feedback" and "negative feedback." Feedback is merely information provided, nothing

less and nothing more. To return to the thermostat analogy, you would never say that a thermostat gave “negative feedback” to the air conditioning.

But because the concepts of negative and positive feedback are so deeply rooted now in our language, people to whom we provide feedback are not likely to treat it simply as information to use in self-regulating. They will often put a value judgment on the information. And if they judge the feedback to be negative, they will often perceive it as criticism.

## Why the “Sandwich Approach” Doesn’t Work

In the effort to make “negative feedback” more palatable, someone decades ago came up with what’s called the “sandwich approach” to feedback. This technique says that managers should “sandwich” negative feedback between two pieces of positive feedback. In other words, employ a pattern of, first saying something positive, then state the so-called “negative feedback,” and follow up with another positive.

At first glance, this sounds like a logical way to minimize the sting of feedback that some would term “negative.” But logical though it might be, the sandwich approach does not work neurologically, particularly when people interpret the feedback as criticism.

Neuroscience has discovered that our brains are super-sensitized to things which might represent danger. As a consequence, we are highly attuned to things like criticism which may pose a threat, whether the threat is to our job, a promotion, a pay raise, our reputation, or our relationship with our boss.

And because of this super-sensitivity, criticism – especially from authority figures or people whose opinion we cherish – exacts a heavy toll on us emotionally. Such a toll, indeed, that two or three positive comments are not nearly enough to counterbalance the impact of the criticism.

Virginia Satir, one of the first psychologists to study this reality, concluded that we need at least seven positive comments to offset the adverse emotional impact of one statement of criticism from someone whose opinion means a lot to us. Others who have built on her research have put that ratio at an even higher level, in one study as high as 17:1

The sandwich approach does not achieve its purpose, therefore, when we couch feedback as criticism or when our hearer takes it as personal criticism. For this reason, careful management of feedback sessions is a must.

## Guidelines on Feedback

The solution to the “criticism dilemma” is not to load up feedback conversations with tons of “attaboys” to counterbalance any remark say which might be construed as criticism. Such a technique would soon seem artificial and contrived.

Rather, we should make the entire setting for the conversation as positive and constructive as possible by heeding the following principles.

1. Be timely in your feedback.

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- It does no good for a thermostat to tell the heating system, "Here's some information about what the room temperature was two days ago."
  - Untimely feedback amounts to nothing more than reflection on past events. It says nothing about what is happening at present.
  - Therefore, provide feedback regularly, on a timely basis, not just when it's time for a quarterly or annual performance review.
2. Go into feedback conversations in "uptime," that is, fully attuned to promoting the well-being and success of the person to whom you are giving feedback.
  3. Even with the most challenging of employees, avoid viewing them as a problem which needs to be "fixed."
    - Instead, picture them in your mind as capable individuals who want to do well, but who need additional information in order to self-manage properly.
    - By adopting this more constructive outlook, you diminish the likelihood that your tone will sound critical or that you will send adverse non-verbal messages inadvertently.
  4. Be precise in your feedback.
    - Avoid generalizations, such as, "You're doing a great job" or "Your overall performance is not what it used to be."
    - Rather, describe accomplishments and deficiencies in performance in one of three types of language" sensory-specific language, behavior-specific language, or data-centric language.
      - Sensory-specific language is verbiage which describes what you've personally seen or heard. An example would be, "I've heard your patient and conciliatory tone this week with several upset customers."
      - An example of behavior-specific language is, "You have routinely gone out of your way this month to help our new sales reps."
      - An example of data-centric language might be, "This is the second quarter in a row that you've fallen well short of your quota. What steps are you taking to turn that trend around?"
  5. Avoid general or ambiguous exhortations such as, "You must try harder to be here on time."

- Among other things, this statement implies that the person does not try to be on time.
    - This, in effect, impugns his or her character.
    - And indictments of character generally produce defensiveness, which closes off receptivity to further feedback.
  - Instead, information-based feedback might say, "Your time card indicates that you arrived late seven days last month. Our standard, as you know, is a 95% punctuality rate. Can I count on you to meet this standard more consistently in the future?"
    - Notice how this statement zeroes in on concrete behavior patterns and specific expectations.
    - Also notice that by casting the call to action in the form of a question instead of an exhortation, the worker's responsibility to self-regulate is further emphasized.
6. Similarly, don't praise in generalities.
- Praise specific actions or patterns of behavior.
  - This type of praise has greater emotional impact and motivational value than a general platitude about doing a good job.
  - In most cases, you will get more of what you praise. So, be sure to praise what you want more of in specific terms.
7. When your feedback aims at improved behavior or performance, don't consider the feedback session complete until the worker has made a commitment to such improvement.
- Agree to benchmarks which the worker will hit by a given date.
  - Ask what you can do specifically to help the worker fulfill this commitment.
8. No matter what happens in the course of the session, maintain a respectful attitude and demeanor from beginning to end.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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