Giving and Receiving
FEEDBACK

3 REASONS TO USE
DELIBERATELY AND GENEROUSLY GIVEN
FEEDBACK AS A DEVELOPMENT TOOL
for your group

ONE

Prevent Wildfires

Mistakes, false starts, imperfect ideas, and room for improvement are facts of life. The earlier on that you can catch these brushfires, the better. With this information, you can target areas for improvement and make small adjustments as you go along instead of waiting until things get out of control.

Think of it this way: Would you rather build a whole house and then have the inspector visit to tell you that the foundation needs to be re-poured, or would you rather that she visit right after the (faulty) foundation is constructed? Either way, the work will have to be re-done. In the first scenario, however, you'll have a whole lot more to undo before you can fix the problem.

TWO

Increase Awareness

If group members are unaware of the impact their actions make on the rest of the group, both positively and negatively, they won't know how to improve as a team member. As they take on more leadership roles, they may *continue* to make the same mistakes with proportionately larger consequences, or they may *stop* making a contribution which was adding value. Feedback increases the awareness of group members, so their actions can be chosen deliberately.

Feedback
is the breakfast
of champions.

THREE

Develop Accountability

Feedback is concrete information about how well a program, process, or position is fulfilling its intended goals. Instead of wondering, gathering feedback puts you in the empowered position of knowing for sure.

From here, you can be proactive. New goals can be established when the old ones have been accomplished. If progress is overdue, you can create accountability through due dates or group challenges.

Following up assignments with individualized feedback makes individuals and teams accountable for outcomes. It lets people know that expectations are serious and that their growth and improvement matter.
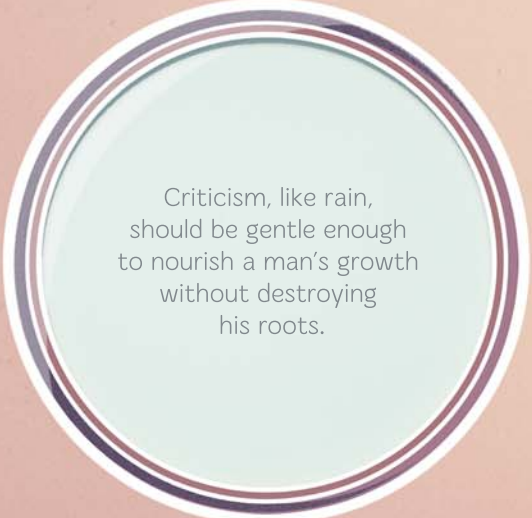
Ken Blanchard

Note on Using Feedback
with Care,
Thoughtful Consideration,
and Intention

Feedback is one of the most powerful and underutilized resources you will ever have access to.

Every individual and group has blind spots - areas that are less than perfect - that may go unrecognized as areas for improvement. Feedback taps into the experience of group members to bring those blind spots into your sightline. When managed thoughtfully, the process of giving, receiving, and responding to feedback is empowering, motivating individuals to develop new skills and patterns and groups to work collaboratively to enhance their structure and systems. When managed poorly, however, the feedback process can be disorienting and extremely hurtful.

It's possible to forget that the feedback being delivered can be very hard for the individual receiving it to hear. The feedback may be something they've never heard before, and if it doesn't align with their self-perceptions, it can rock their identity to the core. Commonly, with "harder" feedback, individuals will wonder if they're still generally competent, worthy people. Some individuals may catastrophize ("If my leadership style was too controlling in this project, then I'm the worst leader ever and will never become a community development expert") or generalize the feedback to encompass all areas of their lives ("If my leadership style was too controlling for this project, I must be a controlling person"). Other common reactions to feedback include denying that the feedback is true or applicable, distorting it to mean something else entirely, and defending against the feedback by justifying or explaining it.

Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots.

Frank A Clark

You can minimize the potential negative impacts by selecting your processes for giving and receiving feedback with intention. Make sure the feedback tools you choose to work with match your group in terms of closeness of relationships, motivation of your group members to develop and grow, and ability to support members as they absorb and respond to the feedback.

Feedback is inherently challenging. Be sure to match the level of challenge that's given to the receptiveness of the group members to not just hear it, but act on it.

One Sweet and Simple Tool for Making the Most *of* Feedback

AKA

The Closed-Loop Feedback Process

Feedback is meant to be used.

Unfortunately, however, feedback is very often collected and shelved. Sometimes this is because the feedback points in the uncomfortable direction of change, and who wants to do that? Sometimes, it's just easier not to deal with it. Either way, these are ridiculously flimsy excuses. If you're going to go through the trouble of collecting feedback, plan to do a good job of it by creating a closed-loop feedback process.

HERE'S WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE (ASSUMING YOU ALREADY HAVE AN ACTION THAT REQUIRED FEEDBACK, TO START THE PROCESS OFF...)

Collect Data

Decide how you'll collect and organize the data. Is a survey the best way to go? Interviews? A discussion? Are the questions you plan to ask targeted to the areas you're gathering feedback on, with prompts for specific examples?

Take Action

Use the feedback to determine a course of action. What themes or pieces of feedback came up most frequently? What would be the most effective way to address them? What timeline is realistic? How will you know your efforts have been successful?

Refine Changes

Establish a time to review progress on the course of action. Check in with the group: Is the change noticeable? What roadblocks are keeping the action from being effective? What other actions could be tried?

Communicate *the* Feedback

Communicate what actions are being taken based on the feedback. This step lets everyone know that their participation was valued, and since they'll be looking for the changes, creates a level of accountability. If some feedback is not being acted on, explain why, and discuss what is being done instead.

Developing *a* Culture *of* Feedback *in your group*

For feedback to be most effective, it needs to be an integral part of your group culture: an expected component of meetings and events, with established processes to support it. If your group has not used feedback before, you can build a strong foundation for its use by introducing your members to the idea of feedback first, before jumping in to deliver it.

Normalize the use of feedback in your group by getting members talking about it early on in the year. Ideally, all members will work together to decide how to use feedback to best serve your group, brainstorming together the value of feedback and how to handle it responsibly. This active participation increases the members' commitment to following through on the processes once they're established, and will get all the members started off on the same page.

Devote a workshop or meeting to the idea of both positive and negative feedback, discussing its value, tools for delivering and receiving it, and how it can best be utilized in the upcoming year to achieve individual and group goals.

To set the tone for the workshop, the facilitators should briefly introduce how feedback can be used as a learning tool, such as gaining insight into blind spots, tracking progress towards goals, or whatever other perspectives are most appropriate for the group.

As a group, establish norms for feedback. This can be done in a brainstorming session, writing ideas down as they come up. Prompt the group with questions about the various elements of feedback such as:

- What are the traits of high-quality feedback? (Delivered in a timely manner vs. three months after the fact, behaviorally specific vs. vague and abstract, all negative vs. well-balanced.)

- What are some potential relational impacts of feedback? On the good side? On the not- so-good side?

- What qualities distinguish good and bad feedback delivery? Good and bad responses to feedback?

- What are the limits of feedback? How do you handle feedback that doesn't resonate with you or align with the other feedback you're received?

You can deepen the conversation by asking members to share their personal experiences with feedback in small teams.

Discussion prompts could include:
What feedback have you been given that most impacted your life? Who gave it to you? How was it given? How did you respond to the feedback at first? Was it easy to hear or not? How do you like to hear feedback now?

- Based on this discussion, ask each team to create a poster of the top three or five traits of high-quality feedback to use as guidelines when delivering feedback. Have them present it briefly to the group.

- Look for similarities in the posters, and establish a list of protocols around handling feedback that suit your group.

At this point, group members should be prepared to expect feedback to feature prominently throughout the year. In the meetings that follow, be sure to continue the conversation. A low-risk workshop focused on the idea of feedback will lay the groundwork, but the real benefit comes from engaging in the actual processes of giving and receiving it in-line with the protocols established by the group.

Help members to engage in feedback by empowering them to propose aspects of the group process or structure that would benefit from it. Challenge them to design a process to collect relevant feedback and design an improvement in response to it. Educate your members on the opportunities available for them to receive personalized feedback, and solicit ideas for new or creative methods to gather feedback in your unique group settings.

> "Only becoming conscious of old and unchosen patterns allows us to change them, and even so, change, no matter how much for the better, still feels cold and lonely at first because it doesn't feel like home."

Gloria Steinem

Three SHORT AND SWEET WAYS TO GATHER FEEDBACK

which are so darn simple that they can be used regularly and liberally by your group in **EVERY SINGLE MEETING**

Feedback cards, round robins, and one-minute essays

are simple tools for group leaders to gather information about the quality and effectiveness of their work. Since these methods are so simple, they can be used as routines for each meeting or event. Additionally, these tools can be extremely empowering to use, as the recipient(s) have so much influence over the feedback theme. You may want to alert members ahead of time about the feedback theme and method for collecting it, or keep things spontaneous by rotating these activities.

Feedback Cards

Each group member is asked to write their feedback, perhaps related to a specific theme or target question, on a note card. These cards are collected and used by the feedback recipient(s) for their development.

SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT FEEDBACK CARDS

- At the beginning of a meeting or other event, let attendees know that they'll be asked to give feedback at the end of the session. Tell them how the feedback will be used, and affirm that their participation in the feedback process is invaluable.

- If the requested feedback will be about a particular topic, let the attendees know ahead of time so they can observe with that thought in mind. For example, you could ask for feedback related to how effectively the meeting is facilitated by the leader, or for "group feedback" on how the attendees do in disagreeing with civility.

- Depending on the nature of the event, you can pass out note cards to the attendees at the beginning of a session so they can write feedback as it comes up, or wait until the session concludes. Preparing the feedback-givers in this way sets a clear expectation for their involvement and clarifies its intended purpose.

- Formalize the structure of the feedback process. Include "Collect Feedback" as the final line item on the agenda, and designate a clear collection point for the feedback cards, such as an envelope labeled "FEEDBACK." (Yes...in big, bold letters so everyone can see you're serious about collecting it!)

WHEN THE RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUR GROUP ARE ESTABLISHED
Round Robins
ARE A QUICK WAY TO GATHER FEEDBACK:

Each member is asked to respond to a feedback prompt, typically going around a circle. They can give their feedback directly to the individual who is requesting it or comment generally on the group process that is the focus of the feedback.

Giving feedback is a skill that people develop over time. Some members may be less comfortable both giving and receiving verbal feedback. You may want to begin the Round Robins early in the year with simple prompts, and progress to higher intensity ones over time, as your group matures.

A

One-Minute Essay
IS ANOTHER SHORT WAY TO
GATHER FEEDBACK IN THE MOMENT

Ask each person to write on a specific point of feedback for one minute. When done on the spur-of-the-moment, these responses are often spontaneous and unedited, making them a great source for honest feedback.

The *All-Important* Step Two

FOLLOW UP

○

Feedback is a two-step process.

Gathering feedback is useless unless it's accompanied by a thoughtful plan to review it, and make changes based on the new information. The time between receiving feedback and following up on it should be short, so as not to lose relevancy or momentum.

Depending on the situation, it may be useful to collect a second round of feedback after the action plan has been implemented. This will give you an idea of how successfully the action plan has addressed the feedback so further changes can be made if necessary.

When the feedback is specific to an individual's performance, the cards can be given directly to him or her. Choose a follow-up structure that suits your group: The feedback recipients could report back on one "takeaway" they'll be working to improve in based on the feedback, or process the feedback in a meeting with a more experienced group member. In the case of harder personal feedback, an individual may need a few days to absorb and process it before reviewing the feedback with a friend or mentor and creating an action plan

If the feedback relates to the leadership team, plan a time to review it when all members can discuss the responses together, then generate an appropriate action plan. Report back to the group on common trends, what changes will be made as a result, and how members can participate in them.

If the feedback was solicited about a group process, members can participate in reviewing it. Each member could read a randomly drawn card from the envelope and the group can discuss the feedback together, then develop an action plan out of that conversation. Or, in particularly sensitive cases, the leaders may want to review the feedback and summarize it for the group to address.

JUST A FEW
PROMPTS
TO GET YOU STARTED IN COLLECTING

Useful Feedback

The following prompts can be used to gather feedback on everything from leadership styles to the energy of your unique group culture. They lend themselves to feedback cards, round robins, and one-minute essays. These prompts will get you started, but the best ones will come from your own group members, so be sure to ask for their input.

How does (recipient) show his/her stress?

What specific actions show improvement in (recipient's) listening skills?

Does (recipient) have any areas of strength that you think are underutilized?

In what ways could (recipient) improve his/her communication?

What does (recipient) do especially well in leading this team?

What is his/her most urgent need for improvement?

How did (recipient) model our core values today?

What actions decrease your confidence in (recipient's) ability to represent our group?

How did we express our core value of {insert core value here} this week? In what ways did we fail to express it?

What did we do today that decreased our trust in each other? Increased our trust?

How are the lines of communication in our group working so far this semester?

Where do we need to strengthen them?

What is the elephant in the room?

What negative pattern do we participate in that erodes our ability to work together?

In what ways are expectations unclear for members? For leaders?

What happened today that got us to this stuck point?

Where are we lacking structure?

What words describe the tone of our meetings?

What does our group really need to talk about but avoids?

What is a source of (dis)organization in our group?

How do we hold ourselves back from taking risks in this group? What do we do that supports risk taking?

7 TIPS FOR DELIVERING HARD FEEDBACK AS EFFECTIVELY AS POSSIBLE

Occasionally, situations come up that involve sharing hard feedback, whether it's unexpected, emotionally-charged, or just plain awkward. These conversations can be understandably stressful, but shouldn't be avoided. You can help to reduce the stress by using these seven tips:

ONE

MAKE SURE YOU HAVE RAPPORT

Feedback is best heard when the person delivering it has a trusting relationship with the recipient. If you don't have this relationship, ask someone who does to deliver the feedback.

TWO

FIND A PRIVATE SPOT

Receiving feedback within earshot of other people can be embarrassing. Plan to meet in a quiet spot or behind closed doors, where you can talk honestly and openly without an audience.

THREE

GIVE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

The more specific you can be about the actions that the feedback refers to, the easier it will be for the recipients to understand. Illustrate the feedback with real-life examples, sharing the impact it had on yourself or others in the group to make sure the recipients understand the exact behaviors that attracted the feedback.

FOUR

FOCUS THE FEEDBACK ON SPECIFIC ACTIONS, NOT THE PERSON

When sharing these examples, focus the feedback on the behavior or action and not on the person who performed it. For example, instead of telling recipients that they are aggressive, describe specific actions such as dominating conversations or not considering the interests of others.

FIVE

EXPLORE OPTIONS TOGETHER

You may want to brainstorm acceptable alternative actions. Some feedback recipients may be acting out of a pattern they've used for years. Exploring alternatives together can help them consider new possibilities and options.

SIX

GIVE FEEDBACK IN A TIMELY MANNER, BUT NOT IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Feedback should be given as close to the time of the event as possible. If emotions are running high, give them a chance to cool off, but don't wait so long that the feedback is no longer useful or relevant.

SEVEN

GIVE THE RECIPIENT A CHANCE TO RESPOND

Feedback can bring up strong feeling and reactions. Give the recipients a chance to talk through their responses and the impact the feedback in having on them in the moment.

A Concise List of Resources
TO SUPPORT YOU IN USING
Deliberately and Generously
GIVEN FEEDBACK
in your group

RESIDENT EXPERTS

Nancy Tavelli
Associate Dean of Students: Campus Life
tavelln@whitman.edu
Nancy is available to facilitate a training session on conflict management that will help your group develop trust and increase its capacity to bring up and work through conflict.

Leann Adams
Assistant Director of Student Activities
adamsle@whitman.edu
Leann is available to advise student leaders on norming feedback in their groups and setting up a feedback structure that's appropriate to the size and purpose of the group.

Several campus counselors are available to advise students on bringing up particularly sensitive subjects with their groups:

Sharon A. Kaufman-Osborn
Counselor
kaufman@whitman.edu

Tracee Anderson
Counselor
anderstl@whitman.edu

Rich Jacks
Associate Dean of Students:
Health and Wellness
jacks@whitman.edu

Adam Kirtley
Stuart Coordinator of
Religious and Spiritual Life
kirtleam@whitman.edu

Suggested Reading

Heen, S., Patton, B., & Stone, D. (2000). Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. New York: Penguin.

Glasser, P., & Glasser, S. (2006). Be Quiet, Be Heard. Communication Solutions Publishing.