

Feedback - it's the key to change

By Rick James

"I was a heavy smoker when I was at university" a good friend told me yesterday. She went on to explain how two friends cornered her one day and said it was damaging her health and her pocket. They pointed out how much she was going to waste on cigarettes over the next five years and how she could ill afford that investment. They said: *"You need to change. If you give up smoking, then we will do two things over the next six months - we will buy you as much chewing gum as you like and we will take you out for a really nice meal every month to celebrate. But if you go back to smoking you will have to repay us everything we have spent on you"*. My friend pleaded for time to consider. But her friends said, *"No, you have to decide now"*. She considered their feedback and decided to give up. The friends drew up a written contract, framed it and put it on her bedroom wall. They all kept their sides of the bargain and are still good friends today.

This story about feedback shows how important relationship, support and celebration are in change. It also shows the value of honesty and truth. As John White, the Christian psychologist says:

"No one ever really changes for the better without somehow facing the truth".

Feedback is an essential part of change. Feedback should be both positive and 'negative'. The Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson famed for his negative feedback, actually attributes his success to the positive feedback he gives. The most important words in management he says are: "Well done". Christian organisations and churches are notoriously bad at giving people feedback. Our positive feedback tends to be vague and superficial, while our negative feedback non-existent. So how can we do it better? Here are some principles and tools:

Make feedback 'normal' - part of the culture

We tend to respond defensively when feedback comes as a big surprise. We respond much better to incremental feedback. McKinseys the global consulting company base their whole operating culture around the principle of regular and consistent feedback. What could we do to make feedback a more normal part of the way we work together?

Check yourself first

We all have our own distortions and biases. Our often unrelated experiences make us jump to conclusions and attribute fault in a situation as if we knew everything about a situation. If something has gone wrong, we tend to magnify the person's contribution to that, while they will tend to explain the same situation as a result of external circumstances. We all judge ourselves by our intentions, but judge others by their actions. Research has shown that it can really help if we stop ourselves before giving feedback and ask:

"What are all the possible causes for this situation and for this person's behaviour?"

We should also think through the cross-cultural and power dynamics which may affect how people interpret what we say.

Make feedback specific

Even positive feedback needs to be specific. If we just say to someone that they did well, but do not say what it was that they did well, then this makes it difficult for them to repeat the behaviour. It is much better to restrict feedback to observable behaviours and facts and avoid the temptation to get into criticising peoples' attitudes (as this will be our subjective interpretation). It helps if we reduce using adjectives which colourfully illustrate our opinions, but can cause defensive reactions and side-track the discussion.

There are a variety of techniques for giving feedback. Many follow the AID model:

Actions - What is the specific behaviour, fact or observation?

Impact - What is the effect the actions have on others, the work situation...?

Do - What could you do differently next time?

McKinseys follow this same formula:

When you did 'x', it made me feel 'y'. In future it would help if you did 'z'.

Make feedback forward facing

This model shows how important it is to turn retrospective feedback into something positive for the future, focussing on desired outcomes. It may be worth taking more of a coaching approach by asking questions like:

How can we develop new performance? What would success look like to you?

How would you achieve that? What are the next steps?

What support do you need?

Make it timely and appropriate

It helps when we give feedback reasonable close to an incident. If we delay too long, then the immediacy and strength may be gone. But should not rush in. We need to make sure there is adequate time and appropriate timing (not late on a Friday afternoon for example). We should also think through a suitable place - feedback is often better in private when it does not involve a loss of face.

Manage your expectations

We should be realistic about what change we can expect from feedback. We may rarely hit the jackpot where people hear what we say, agree and act upon it. All we can hope to change is people's intentions. Their actions are another story. Sometimes it is a real achievement, just to put something on the agenda. The person may initially reject the feedback, but they may begin to think about it. When they get similar feedback from someone else, they may then respond more positively. You often have to let feedback settle for a while, rather than expecting instant success.

Practice giving feedback

Like so many things, we improve our feedback through practice. Sometimes it can help if we write our feedback before saying it. This gives us time to checking our own biases, our own opinions and how specific, useful and irrefutable our feedback

is. We can practice all the time - the next time we get served in a restaurant, rather than just thinking the service is good (or bad) what specifically did we like or not like about it?