

Giving Difficult Feedback: 5 Steps to Telling Inconvenient Truths

One of the most challenging aspects of a manager's job, the part that is most messy and unpredictable, is giving corrective feedback. Whether it's delivering a less than stellar review, laying someone off or coaching a challenging employee, for those of us who are wired to avoid conflict, this can be excruciating. We often walk away from these encounters feeling inadequate and ineffective. Some managers are born mentors, for the rest of us there are steps we can take to shift this from a dreaded management chore to a welcome opportunity to coach our employees toward greater success.

1. Reframe "Bad" News: When we are faced with telling someone they are not meeting our expectations, we think of it as "bad" news. The reality is that telling the truth to someone else is a show of respect, even if they don't like what they are hearing. We all have blind spots and candid feedback is a gift in our power to give. Let the employee know that you are giving the feedback in the spirit of providing the information they need to be successful.

2. Come Out With It: No one likes to break unwelcome news to employees. If you have to do it, come right to the point rather than making small talk. Delivering feedback compassionately and directly is both professional and effective. Dancing around and stalling only aggravate the situation and make it more agonizing for the recipient. If the news is irreversible (such as when a person is being passed over for promotion), let the person know that the decision is irrevocable. Don't waver or sugarcoat the situation.

3. Be Specific and Actionable: Without very specific feedback it becomes impossible for the employee to improve performance. Unclear, poorly communicated or poorly understood expectations yield murky results. Make sure the employee understands your feedback clearly and that the actions and behaviors you want to see, or not see again, are very clear to her. "You need to do better on your projects," is not clear or actionable. "Your projects must be completed on time, on budget and approved by HR," is unambiguous.

4. Listen and Coach: Let employees express their opinions, feelings and reactions to your feedback. This is a coaching opportunity. Remember, you've had time to think about what you want to say, they are just hearing it for the first time. Give them some time to digest the information and come back to you with an action plan. Ask them their perceived obstacles to meeting your expectations and brainstorm with them on ways to overcome challenges. Unless you are letting someone go, use this as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship and build trust.

5. Find Something to Prize: Feedback should put as much weight on what "is" working as on what is not. It's important to acknowledge and reinforce the things that are meeting or exceeding your expectations. This not only gives the employee more information for how to succeed, it underscores the fact that he is capable of doing it in other areas. Coach employees on how they can transfer success in one aspect of the job to success in another. However, it's important that what you praise is real and relevant and that you are sincere.

Although it may never be enjoyable to give employees corrective feedback, using the steps above to share honestly and with compassion will increase your confidence and effectiveness. If someone becomes emotional or angry, you can listen with empathy and offer to give them time to digest the information and talk about it at another time. Most employees, once they are past their initial reaction, will appreciate your candor and support.

About the Author

As a professional coach, consultant, writer and workshop leader, Deb Dominguez, President and CEO of TrainManagers.com, is a catalyst for organizational excellence. Deb's background includes 20-years of experience as a successful corporate marketing executive for a Fortune 200 company. Deb holds a Master's degree in Spiritual Psychology from the University of Santa Monica and a Bachelor's degree in Marketing and Business Administration from San Diego State University.

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