

TIPSHEET: “FUNDAMENTALS OF FEEDBACK”

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(Quick Reference Guide – excerpted from *The Full Potential* by Scott Mautz)

- **Be specific**
- **Be sincere**
- **Be calibrating**
- **Be commensurate**
- **Be timely**
- **Be tailored**

• **BE SPECIFIC**– A friend’s grandmother used to say, “White bread ain’t nutritious”. Same goes with feedback. Generic, bland feedback won’t help anybody and has more potential to frustrate - especially if it’s unclear what the recipient should go work on or keep doing. It can trigger the “Can you be more specific?” or “Can you give me an example?” question, which can irk an ill-prepared coach, and change the vibe of a feedback discussion altogether. The vast majority of people will also want to get to work on the opportunity area highlighted – difficult to do when they don’t know what tools to bring to work on what construction project.

Specificity should also include a focus on facts and the impact of behaviors, not a judgment of the person themselves. Desired alternative behaviors should be discussed.

And as discussed in the process of pinpointing, be brave.

Easier said than done, I know, so here’s some help.

In the face of the toughest feedback to give, first start the discussion by simply asking coachees, “How do you think you’re doing?”

You’d be amazed at the response you’re likely to get. First of all, the fact that you’re asking that question will indicate to coachees that something could be amiss.

When people sense this, they instinctively want to arrive at a possible pain point in their own way, easing into it rather than having someone slap them with it. And so they’ll feel compelled to control the situation and will start winding their way towards talking about the very opportunity area you want to discuss. More often than not, coachees have enough self-awareness to land at least in the ballpark of what you want to cover. They may even give you a direct path to go straight to the heart of the difficult issue.

That said, I do realize that there are cases where you have to give tough feedback to astoundingly non self-aware individuals.

In those cases, I think back to a coaching seminar I attended early in my career where the instructor encouraged us to treat really tough feedback with “drip irrigation”. Drip irrigation is a watering method used by farmers whose crops grow in the desert. It’s a process of slowly releasing water over a crop in drips via long thin tubes. This is necessary because if the water came pouring out over the crops and onto the hard-baked soil, it would never soak in, just sitting on the surface until it evaporated. No nourishment, just withering.

That’s what happens when you pour on the tough feedback all in one dose. You have to administer it a little at a time, let it sink in, and then move on to the next “watering”.

• **BE SINCERE**– If it comes from the heart it sticks in the mind. You have to mean it to drive meaning; the opposite is undermining. And don’t miss the opportunity to line corrective feedback with a bedding of care. Showing up as sincerely caring about wanting to help them become better versions of themselves can make it easier for the recipients to digest the feedback.

Relatedly, a great way to show you’re sincere in your desire for them to improve is to ask for feedback yourself

as a coach. Then visibly act on the feedback you're given. Reciprocity demonstrates sincerity.

• **BE CALIBRATING**– People instinctively want to know the level of seriousness behind the feedback they are receiving so they can orient themselves relative to their desired path of progression. Great coaches provide this calibration. For example, let them know that the feedback they're receiving is “not unusual at this point” if that's the case. Or tell them that they're “off-track at this point” if that's the case.

Just don't leave them guessing.

Especially since when many people hear corrective feedback, it's all they can focus on, and they'll assume the worst from it. They won't remember the positive things you said.

So it's critical that your feedback registers the message that you want it to, without room for wild interpretation.

By the way, if the next career level is a destination that's meaningful to your coachees, they need to know if they've taken a step backwards in that journey. They need to be calibrated to ensure understanding of what it takes to get promoted to the next level and how their opportunity area may hold them back if not addressed.

Similarly, if they are highly ambitious, they may want to understand the gap between their performance and the “best in class” at their level.

Of course, in any scenario they also need to know that you stand ready to help them grow and get back on-track to whatever they're aspiring to.

Another effective way to calibrate is relative to your own personal experience. If coachees needs to work on an area that you've also shared in the past and have successfully improved upon (even if you're still working on it), the commonality can be calming and bonding. It's always comforting to know “you're not alone”, especially if the very person giving you the feedback has walked a mile in your shoes.

• **BE COMMENSURATE**– To maximize receptivity to the message, it’s important to be proportional in the scale and amount of reinforcing and re-directive feedback you give. Don’t overstate or understate the impact of the outcome you are praising or pushing on.

And remember a fundamental human truth - we tend to do a lot more right than wrong as human beings, and want to be reminded as such. Great coaches help keep the distribution of the feedback commensurate with this reality. Research indicates a 5:1 ratio is about right – five pieces of positive feedback for every one piece of corrective feedback.

Note that this ratio changes when you have a teenage daughter. Then it’s 50 pieces of “You’re right. I don’t know anything” for every one piece of “Yes, I agree – your life *is* totally ruined”.

Anyway, the key is to not be sparing on the praise to share, while being discerning on the most important constructive points to discuss.

• **BE TIMELY**– “After the fact” feedback means “matter of fact” feedback. The feedback just won’t resonate as much and seem as sincere if too much time passes between a feedback inducing event and the sharing of the feedback itself.

• **BE TAILORED**– In my experience, there are three kinds of people when it comes to receiving corrective feedback.

The first kind like to hear corrective feedback right up front, straight with no chaser. If they know such feedback is on its way, they simply won’t be able to enjoy any positive reinforcement that might precede it.

The second kind prefer “the compliment sandwich”, when you insert the corrective feedback in between two pieces of positive feedback.

The third kind say they want the first kind, but in reality want the second kind.

The point is that people vary in how they like to receive feedback, particularly constructive feedback. Being tuned in to this helps increase the quality of the experience for all.

Another powerful element of tailoring feedback comes into play when providing feedback for cross-functionals (people that work in a discipline other than yours). Great coaches connect the dots on what's important in someone's specific function to succeed, and provide positive or constructive feedback on those specific elements.

For example, whatever business you're in, it's likely true that the legal function in particular values a balance of smart risk protection and the ability to creatively advance the business. Lawyers adept at such a skill would be gratified to hear from you about this strength (and that their bosses knew your evaluation of this strength as well). Likewise, they would also appreciate you taking the time to understand what's important for success in the legal function, and helping them improve on such vital performance elements.

Since the process of giving feedback can truly be tricky and even intimidating (and done poorly can drain meaning from the occasion) here's another tool to help you navigate the course of discussion. What follows is a tailored framework for sharing feedback that I've developed and used to great effect.

The SHARES Feedback Framework

Situation - describe the "state of the union", situation, and corresponding context

Halo - the discussion with empathy and sincerity as you enter the next step

Articulate - provide specifics on the performance shortfall or behavior that's caught your eye

Result - share the result it's having on you, others, the project, or desired career progression

Example - give an example of an alternative behavior or desired alternative outcome

Solicit - the employee's point of view while listening to understand and empathize