



The Insight Search: A simple method to make feedback work

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My client (let's call her Susan) was in a tough position. Susan had to give some feedback, and she was concerned that the recipient wasn't going to like it. The cherry on top of this sundae was that the person Susan needed to speak with was senior to her in the organization.

Susan had read books on communication and managing delicate conversations, but like so many others she freezes up in these situations. The books are too complicated. There is too much to remember, and Susan hates conflict. When the conversation begins she avoids what she has to say or charges through it to the point of trampling her colleague.

How can Susan deliver this feedback?

The answer to *how* lies in *who*. Who is feedback meant to serve – the deliverer or the recipient? It should serve the recipient, but to watch people provide feedback you would think it was purely for the benefit of the deliverer.

Sometimes it seems like feedback is purely a vehicle to allow the deliverer to express all of her pent up frustrations. A lot of feedback is given in the sit-down-and-take-it style. In these cases the recipient can't get a word in edgewise. The deliverer argues her point, backs it up, defends it, overstates it, and repeats it. This certainly doesn't serve the recipient who becomes more and more frustrated, angry and defensive in this type of scenario. We should call this force-feedback as the recipient is force-fed what he doesn't want.

Other times feedback is candy coated to the point of being unrecognizable. This may seem like it is for the benefit of the recipient – to spare his feelings. In reality this delivery is also made for the sake of the deliverer. It spares the discomfort of saying something difficult. This also doesn't serve the recipient who leaves the conversation as unaware as when he arrived. We should call this saccharine-sweet as the recipient is left with an overly sweet and not entirely pleasant taste.

What is the best way to provide feedback?

What would feedback look like if it were designed for the recipient? In fact, there are whole professions dedicated to this question. They generally focus their work on making training more effective, but their guidelines are useful for feedback. They are experts in adult learning theory and are called instructional designers.

There are two important lessons they can teach us about how adults learn. First, we learn when and what we want to learn. If we are not interested in something it doesn't matter how well it is delivered. We will not absorb, accept or internalize it. When the recipient isn't interested, the scenario is doomed from the start. Second, we learn through experience. This experience can be talking, asking questions, acting, visualizing or any other method that makes us active in the process. A passive recipient also will not learn.

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People learn when they are interested in the lesson and when they are involved in the process. I suggest we call this recipient-centered process by a new name. It is an *insight search*.

People are generally interested in insights. Insights evoke curiosity and require processing to maximize understanding. For someone to receive an insight he has to involve himself mentally in the process. This is what feedback should be but rarely is – an interactive and engaging process in which the recipient actually seeks and attains new insights.

There are five steps to the insight search:

1. Ask for permission

If the recipient isn't interested in what you have to say you're wasting your breath anyway. Begin by asking if he wants to hear what you have to say. But don't ask if he wants feedback. No one does. Here is the question:

"Can I offer you an observation?"

That's it. Don't say anything more or less. This question is important for the recipient because it is non-threatening. An observation could be any number of things – positive, negative, neutral, exciting, interesting, even insightful. The recipient tends to be open to this, certainly more so than to the offer of feedback.

When he says, "yes" he has committed to hearing you. This satisfies our first need of adult learning. The recipient has just agreed to the goal of listening to and considering your observation. If he says, "no," it's certainly better to know he isn't interested before launching into the observation. Then you can let it go and determine whether or not to offer the observation at another time.

This question is also important for you, the deliverer. It primes you to focus on what you observed – what you heard or saw. It grounds you in reality and reminds you to steer clear of the explanations, justifications, and interpretations that make feedback so painful to deliver and to receive.

2. State a single sentence observation

In my experience most people err in feedback on the side of over-talking. They get nervous and they ramble. This either clouds their message leaving the recipient confused or intensifies a criticism making the recipient angry and defensive. The single sentence observation is a powerful antidote to this. It might sound like this.

"Your presentation in the sales meeting lasted 45 minutes."

Then stop. Your silence is far more powerful than anything else you could say.

You might want to express that he lost the customer or annoyed the partners or was oblivious to how his ramblings aggravated the other people in the meeting. There are many other observations that you could offer, but at this stage they will only serve to limit your message.

The recipient needs to process your observation and determine whether or not he wants to hear more. If he doesn't, there is no value in you continuing. If he does, you'll discover that by his response to the silence.

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3. **Be “okay” with defensiveness**

At this point the recipient might become defensive and tell you you’re wrong or confused or worse. In my experience there is no way to win this as an argument. You can’t convince this person. So fight your natural instincts to stick up for your own view of the situation. It won’t help. Here’s your answer.

“Okay.”

That’s it. Don’t say anything else. Again, your silence will be more powerful than anything else you could say. One of two things will happen. The recipient will either reiterate his defensive position or he will retreat from it. If he remains defensive then you know it’s time to walk away from this conversation. If he retreats and asks you a question then you know you can continue to step 4.

4. **State single sentence backups**

Prepare 3-4 single sentence observations that back up or relate to your initial observation. For example,

“The presentation was only scheduled to last 20 minutes.”
“The partner spent a lot of time looking at his watch.”
“No one asked any questions at the end.”

Deliver these one at a time and allow silence after each for the recipient to respond and indicate interest in additional observations and discussion.

5. **Search for insights together**

At this point if you have followed the first four steps, you and the recipient will be ready to search for some insights. Search is a key concept. It indicates that you and the recipient are both in this together, looking to find insights that might relate to the observations revealed. You aren’t feeding these to the recipient. Rather, you are searching together to find what these insights might be.

Feedback is a system that is generally broken. It doesn’t serve the purpose of developing the recipient. Rather it is usually a tool designed to allow the deliverer to vent. The insight search shares the control and authority in the conversation and engages both parties in the learning process.

Say goodbye to feedback. It might open a whole new world of insights.

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Noah Blumenthal is an Executive Coach who has supported hundreds of top executives to improve leadership effectiveness, increase their personal influence, set and achieve their goals, and think more strategically. He works with fast-paced business owners, CEOs, Executive Directors, and top salespeople, helping them to gain fresh perspectives on their businesses and themselves. Noah is dedicated to raising his clients’ self-awareness to produce better understanding and superior decision-making for break-through business results

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