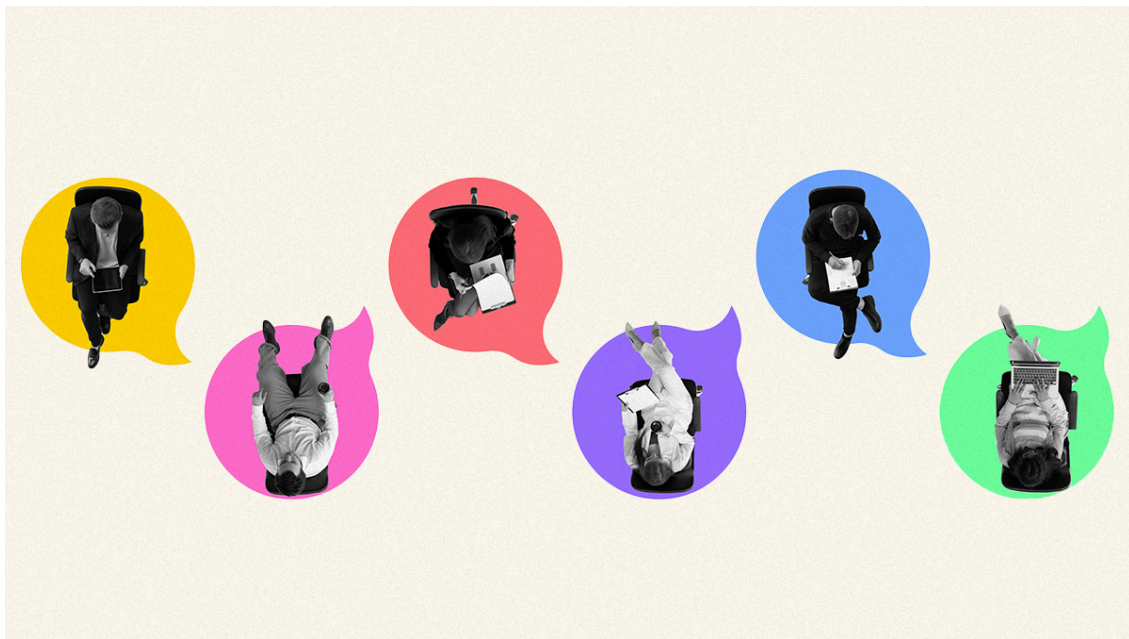


**Giving Feedback**

# Overcome Your Fear of Giving Feedback

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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**Summary.** Managers often have pre-conceived notions that can act as a barrier to giving timely, helpful, and honest performance feedback. Three of the most common preconceived notions are: 1) the feedback conversation is going to be long and drawn out; 2) the feedback... [more](#)

Giving performance feedback is a part of every people leader's job. And yet, in my work with these leaders and teams, I've found that they often have negative mental models of what a feedback conversation is supposed to look like. Those pre-conceived

notions can act as a barrier to giving timely, helpful, and honest performance feedback. Part of my job as a coach and facilitator is to help challenge people's mindsets about what makes giving feedback so hard.

Here are three of the most common pre-conceived notions I hear that contribute to feedback anxiety, and what to do about them.

### **1. The feedback conversation is going to be long and drawn out.**

Let's say you have a colleague with whom you have a good working relationship. You care about the other person's perspectives, and they care about yours. You have observed that they care about the quality of their work, and the impact they have on other people and projects. In addition, when you've given them feedback in the past, they've received it without defensiveness and made the changes you requested.

Guess what? You're likely working with a "feedback magnet" — someone who readily accepts and acts on feedback. When you're working with a colleague like this, you don't necessarily need to have long, drawn out feedback conversations. You might be able to give fast feedback — simply sharing the behavior or performance you're observing.

For example, you might say "I noticed that you weren't able to answer the regulators' question about new risks in our meeting yesterday" — and then stop talking. If you're working with a feedback magnet, they're likely to acknowledge their misstep, and offer their own plan for remedying it. For example, "I know. I wasn't as prepared as I needed to be for that question. I'm following up today with the regulators, and for the next meeting, I'll have done a deep dive into new risks so that I'm ready." And then, you can thank them for their proactivity, and offer to make yourself available if and when they need you.

Of course, not every feedback conversation you'll have will be with someone who is self-aware, self-motivated, and self-directed. In those cases, you have a longer conversation ahead of you. But don't assume that every conversation needs to be long or multifaceted.

## **2. I need to make the feedback perfect.**

Most performance feedback is a combination of objective input (observed through measurable data, facts, and backed up by verifiable evidence) and subjective input (influenced by personal opinions, feelings, or experiences). This means that your employee might see things differently than you do, and you may or may not be “right” the first time. If you're willing to having a feedback dialogue rather than a monologue, you're likely to get new information, additional perspectives, and even reactions to the feedback that you should consider. This means that your planned 30-minute meeting might become a series of discussions for the feedback to be more useful for both of you.

Feedback might take more than one conversation when:

- The feedback is nuanced or complex.
- You're not sure that the other person understands the feedback, and you want to help them get it.
- You're not sure you understand the other person's perspective, and you want to really listen.
- The recipient has a negative reaction to the feedback, and you want to give both of you time to regroup.
- There's disagreement about the feedback.
- You realize that you didn't have enough context and want to update the feedback.

- You made a mistake in the feedback and need to fix it.

This will make feedback easier in the short term when you can free yourself from needing to get it perfect right out of the gate. It can also make it easier in the long run, when your colleague learns that that you're going to give them the opportunity to share their perspective.

### **3. My feedback is going to be taken the wrong way.**

In my workshops on giving and receiving effective feedback, participants regularly share their concerns that they will hurt the other person's feelings or make them angry. In fact, their anxiety about how employees will respond often delays or prevents them from giving helpful, timely, and direct feedback. This means that their colleagues don't know what they're doing well, where they need to develop, what the expectations are, and how to get there.

It's understandable that you don't want to upset your direct reports — or anyone else for that matter. Nevertheless, other people's reactions and responses to feedback are largely out of your control (and sometimes out of their own). Whether an employee takes it personally, gets defensive, bursts into tears, rejects it, questions it, or accepts the feedback is based on a number of extenuating factors including personality, current context, overall life experiences, cultural background, and much more.

And while you have a contribution to how they experience the feedback, you are not in total control of it.

So, while it's helpful to know that you can't "make" someone feel sad or angry, you do need to commit to making your part of the conversation as helpful and productive as possible.

This includes articulating a positive intention for the feedback, being clear about what you're observing and requesting, naming the impact, focusing on strengths, developing actionable next steps, and delivering the feedback with care and curiosity.

For example, you might say, "Kyle, I'd like to give you some feedback on your communication style so that you can have more productive conversations with your team members. Before we begin, please know that any feedback I'm giving you is because I want to help you make the strongest impact you can on the team, and I want to discuss any obstacles you're experiencing or resources you might need.

I notice that when Scott and Shira make suggestions in weekly staff meetings, you often respond with "Here's why that won't work" instead of really listening and being curious about their perspectives. One impact of this is that they are starting to participate less in meetings, meaning you're not getting diverse ideas — and they're going to disengage. I know you to be an inclusive leader, and someone who truly cares about the team, which is why I am bringing this to your attention. How do you see it? What might you do differently moving forward? And how can I best support you?"

It also includes asking for feedback on your feedback, so that you can improve your impact as well. This could sound something like, "Kyle, I want to make sure that the feedback I'm giving you is helping you grow and succeed in your role and career. The best way for me to do that is to ask you for feedback on my feedback style and approach. Would you share with me one or two things that I could do differently in giving you feedback that would be more helpful? And what am I doing that I should keep doing?"

Keep in mind that, with a power differential, you may have to ask a direct report for this kind of upward feedback more than once, or offer specific examples of feedback skills you know you need to work on, or tell the story of a time when you helped your boss give you more productive feedback by sharing what worked and what didn't with them.

Giving feedback isn't optional for people leaders but making it harder than it needs to be certainly is.

**Deborah Grayson Riegel** is a professional speaker and facilitator, as well as a communication and presentation skills coach. She teaches leadership communication at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and has taught for Wharton Business School, Columbia Business School's Women in Leadership Program, and Peking University's International MBA Program. She is the author of *Overcoming Overthinking: 36 Ways to Tame Anxiety for Work, School, and Life* and the best-selling *Go To Help: 31 Strategies to Offer, Ask for, and Accept Help*.

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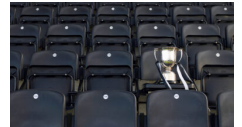


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