



Difficult conversations - text

Chapter 4

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving and receiving feedback are common conversations in the workplace, but that does not make them easy. Many people struggle with being on both sides of the conversation. They do not want give feedback and they certainly do not want to hear it!

But it doesn't have to be that way.

How do you feel about feedback?

Imagine your monthly 1-2-1 with your manager is tomorrow.

Feedback is an item on the recurring agenda and you have a feeling that, this month, your manager will give you some constructive feedback about a project that took longer than anticipated.

How do you feel?

- Nervous
- Defensive
- Neutral
- Optimistic

When asked this question, many people do not feel optimistic heading into a feedback conversation. This is natural. The same is true of those who need to deliver feedback. Our brains often see feedback as a threat and try to warn us off with emotion.

The good news is that you can prepare for either giving or receiving feedback and cultivate a mindset that will help create a positive outcome.

In this chapter, you will learn how to prepare emotionally for giving or receiving feedback and you will learn a behaviour-based feedback model (COIN) which you can follow during a feedback conversation. The COIN model will also help you prepare what to say in that conversation.

Preparing for a feedback conversation

The attitude you bring to a conversation, as well as your ability to defuse your reactions will speak volumes and will affect the other person's willingness and ability to engage with you. Ideally, you would come to a conversation where you will be either giving or receiving feedback with a growth mindset; a curious mindset that is open to learning.

Your mindset is determined by your thinking. So, a good place to begin is with your underlying thoughts, analysing whether they will be helpful in a feedback conversation and aiming to develop them into a growth mindset.

Growth mindsets

A growth mindset focuses your attention on learning and possibility. It has you be more committed to growth than to comfort. Discomfort is almost irrelevant when compared to the potential growth and learning available.

A growth mindset also requires a commitment to curiosity and openness. It requires us to set aside our need to be right and to look good; we shift from dwelling on the past to creating something new.

Use the steps below to start working on your own growth mindset.

Notice your thoughts

Pick one of your difficult conversations where you could fall into hopelessness or negativity. Reflect on your thoughts about this conversation, the other person and yourself. Be as honest with yourself as possible.

You might notice thoughts like: "They really messed this up" "They made me look bad" "This is my fault" or "I know I am right"

Acknowledge which are 'fixed mindset' thoughts

These are normal human thought patterns that keep you safe and stable. But they all indicate a **fixed mindset** and are not helpful if you want to have a positive and productive conversation.

Acknowledge this and aim to put the thoughts to one side.

Focus on the possibilities

Focusing on positivity and possibility might be a little challenging if the conversation you have in mind includes addressing negative behaviour, mistakes (theirs or yours) or performance issues.

But mistakes and poor performance do not define a person. Think of them as opportunities to grow and to begin a new path to flourishing.

Choose a new thought

Choose a new, growth-focused ways of thinking that you could adopt so you could have a more positive outcome. For example: "I can help them learn" "Our working relationship matters" "We both have lessons to learn" or "I can convey a message with care".

Practice and remind yourself

Practise your new thought pattern. Repeat it over and over and remind yourself of it as you move forward with your planning and at the start of the conversation.

Nurture their strengths

Growth doesn't mean only focus on problems and fixing them. It is also very much about growing and developing one's strengths.

Helping someone nurture their strengths will help them develop towards excellence. Focusing on strengths rather than problems will also bring in some dopamine and motivation.

But our brain's **error detectors** will keep pulling our attention to what is wrong. Sometimes all we can see is the problem and then we just want to fix it.

We need to use some PFC power to refocus our attention on what's possible and to look at capabilities. There are likely many to choose from.

Shantanu wanted to give feedback to someone who speaks too much in a meeting. He framed the feedback around honing their strengths - their willingness to contribute and their sharp thinking - rather than telling them to be quiet.

Staying calm and collected

As you have seen in previous chapters, giving and receiving feedback can cause your limbic system to send threat signals, increasing your levels of adrenaline and cortisol. But remember, you have control over how you respond.

Most people appreciate managers, team members and others in their life who can stay calm in a difficult situation.

How to stay calm in feedback conversations

These tools will help you stay with emotions that might show up when you give or receive feedback, or in other difficult conversations.

Use the ABC model

The ABC model is always useful to get you through emotions and back to your PFC. Using ABC is particularly helpful for when you are feeling uncomfortable as you anticipate a difficult conversation.

Recall that ABC is first about being aware of your current state. There's no judgement, just noticing.

Then take a mental step back. Breathe, relax as best you can and let your mind calm.

Once you are able to calm your mind, you can more easily choose a mindset, attitude or set of behaviours to use as you move into the conversation.

Stay present and connected

It is important that you have the space to hear the other person in a feedback conversation, whether you are giving or receiving the feedback. Make sure that the conversation is taking place at a time when you can be present and you have the capacity to listen fully; rearrange the conversation if you need to.

When you are in the conversation, strive to stay present. One of the worst things you can do in a conversation is to disconnect from the other person when either of you is upset. Emotional storms pass, just stay connected.

When others are emotional: stay with them, stay present and stay connected. Even if there is silence; it is OK to just stay. Listen to them and let them know that you are there for them. When there is a moment of calm for them, reach out to ask how they are doing. You can be on their side even if you are delivering difficult information to them.

When you feel emotional: let the other person know you need a moment to gather your thoughts. But stay there. Remember to breathe. On the other hand, you might suggest regrouping in 5 or 10 minutes and go out for a breather. Just do not run out of the room and abandon the other person.

Allow and label emotions

We react, we have emotions. It is normal and it is OK. For you and for other people. Let's normalise emotions and include them. Emotions aren't just for the therapist's office, soap operas and HR. They happen every day.

When you feel emotional:

If you have just received unexpected feedback and been attacked in some way, take a moment to feel your reaction and name it, perhaps even out loud: *"I'm surprised", "I feel hurt by this", "this feels unfair", etc.* This will help you re-engage your PFC and respond as calmly as possible.

When the other person feels emotional:

If the other person is showing strong emotions (or trying to hide them), let them know that emotions are normal. You can even ask them to name what they feel (don't assume). If they name them, it can help their limbic system stop firing.

Do not vent

Venting your emotions is a great thing to do to burn off adrenaline and cortisol.

Your emotions: But when you are upset it is not a good idea for you to vent your emotions at the other person; not if you want to have a successful productive conversation. Unless, of course, they understand that you are just getting adrenaline out of your system and are not yelling at them.

Others' emotions: You can invite the other person to do this (but do not take on anything they say during this time - just let them spit it out). Just help them get the adrenaline out of their system. Perhaps go for a walk together. Or suggest they yell it out (but not directly *at* you).

Go beyond perspectives

Receiving feedback will not always feel good, especially if the feedback is wrapped in another person's perspective.

If you feel strong emotion when receiving feedback from another's perspective:

Challenge yourself to stay with it. You can recognise that the feelings will pass. You can put your attention on the other person and start listening to what they are saying. You can move towards creating a productive, positive outcome.

If you are able to do that, try asking yourself: **'What is the 2% truth I can find in this feedback?'** Usually, even if the feedback is delivered poorly or is based on assumption, you will be able to find the 2% truth that you can take on board.

When you are delivering feedback:

Make sure you stick to the facts rather than your own perspective. The COIN model on the page after next will help you with this. If the other person experiences strong emotions in response to the feedback, stay connected with them.

Reflect

Consider your key takeaway from the above list of tools.

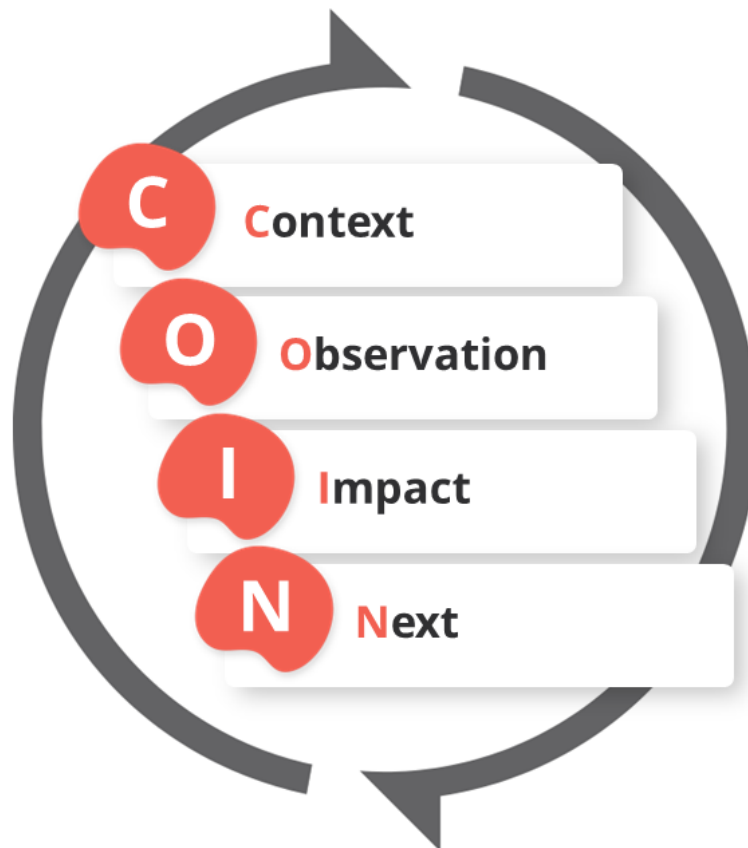
- Which techniques will you use to help you remain calm, cool and collected when giving and receiving feedback?
- How will you support others when you are delivering feedback?

The COIN model

The COIN model is useful for many kinds of feedback. You can use it to turn your complaints and criticisms into requests, or to give someone feedback if they have done something that you get triggered by.

Take a look at these examples of wording to use and avoid at each stage of COIN.

The COIN Model



Context

The first step is to describe the **Context** or setting in which the other person's behaviour occurred.

Think of a specific time they used the behaviour you want them to change. Remember details about the time and place so you can share this with them. A very recent example will be better than one from long ago.

Avoid generalisations such as "You always...". Be specific.

Observation

Next, state what you **Observed**. It is important that this observation is not judgemental, nor an interpretation of what they did.

You might have observed that someone spoke with a loud voice – that is the observation and is the easiest thing for them to hear. If you assume they were angry, that is actually your interpretation and possibly not true. A raised voice is what you observed. Telling someone they raised their voice will be easier for them to hear than "you were angry."

The purpose of this step is to help the person have a clear example to refer back to and a clear understanding of the behaviour they need to change.

Impact

Then describe the Impact that their behaviour had.

Use "I" statements here to avoid blame or assumption. "I was upset" rather than, "you upset me".

Helping the other person understand the impact of their actions will give them a reason – bigger than themselves - to change their behaviour.

Next

Suggest **what could happen next time** by making a request. What would you like them to do differently?

Either use your coaching skills to help the other person come up with another approach or, if you are clear about what you want them to do, it is more honest to make a request of them. What would help them in this situation the next time?

Using COIN

Take a look at COIN in practice in this conversation between Desi and Jason. Notice how Desi avoids making assumptions and generalisations; she sticks to the facts and the impact that Jason's actions had on her.

Before the conversation...

Desi returned from her lunch break to find the majority of her project team in a meeting together. Was she meant to be there, too? Confused, she checked her calendar. No invite. She opened one of her colleague's calendars and saw "Project X check in", arranged by Jason. The rest of the team were invited.

Desi took a deep breath and used the COIN model to prepare how to bring this up with Jason.

C: Context

"Jason, I'd like to have a quick chat about the check in meeting that happened earlier today."

O: Observation

"I saw the meeting taking place and took note of who was in there. The majority of the team were present, but myself and Joe weren't invited."

I: Impact

"I felt excluded from the team. I have also missed the opportunity to share some important customer feedback with the group which means the team will be less prepared for tomorrow's pitch."

N: Next

"I think it's really important that I'm at those meetings, so please will you tell me about them in the future?"

It isn't about the models!

There are many models for feedback and difficult conversations. We have presented two in this and previous chapter but there is no one right model or right way. You can mix steps from COIN and SHARE, find other models or even make up your own steps.

In addition to staying in relationship with the other person, there are some important rules of thumb to follow. These tips and reminders from previous chapters, will help you have a successful conversation regardless of the model or if you don't have steps to follow at all.

Focus on behaviours rather than personality:

What did you see, hear or otherwise notice? What were the actions, facial expressions, gestures, words, tone of voice or language used?

DON'T: Make it more personal by saying, *"You were sloppy"*, *"You don't know how to create a spreadsheet"*, *"You were angry"*. Statements that begin with "you" will feel like an attack. And these are also interpretations, which might not even be correct.



DO: Instead, use language like this: "Our branding guidelines were not clear on those slides", "The numbers in the table didn't seem to add up correctly", "The voice you used with Sam was loud and sharp".

Use 'I' statements:

How does their behaviour affect you? If they respect you, their impact on you will matter and it's more honest to talk about how you felt rather than how they "made you feel".



Use: *"I felt upset"* rather than *"you upset me"* or *"you make me feel..."*. No one can really *make* you feel anything, your feelings are a combination of your mind-set, your previous experiences, your needs and things you are sensitive about. What the other person does, influences you of course, but it is up to you to take responsibility for your feelings. So, please report on how you feel: *"I feel..."*

Prepare yourself mentally and emotionally:

Make sure that your fears and needs are managed or set aside. Turn off hot emotions and learn from your more subtle emotions. Practise ABC or other mindful techniques to get your limbic system under control.

Be clear how you want the other person to feel and find the mindset or attitude that will support that outcome. Let go of your assumptions and use metacommunication skills to make sure your needs are also met. Know what you want to communicate - use the models to help you prepare.



Set a time that's appropriate for both of you and that's good for both of your brains. Use a soft start up to let the other person know where you want to go in the conversation.

Take care of your brain and theirs:

Do whatever you can to help yourself and the other person have access to your PFCs. Stay away from toxic behaviours and provoking limbic reactions.



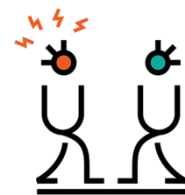
Pay attention to how present you both are. If you or the other person can't stay present, it's not realistic to expect a productive outcome.

Support the other person. Help them stay in this conversation. It will be quite normal for them to have a threat response. See if you can have empathy for the emotions they're having (without stepping over it or pretending it's not happening) and maybe you can even learn something about what's important to them and that might help you to support them moving forward.

Allow emotions and get curious about them:

We are emotional creatures and emotions are part of this process. Trying to shut them out will likely shut down the conversation.

Emotions are informative. If the other person is emotional, just stay with them and get curious about what has happened and what needs are being expressed. If their emotions are strong and stormy and take over the conversation, wait until they pass. Then get curious about them.



Learn to stay with emotions, even if they make you uncomfortable.

Recover together

Just because you are engaged in a difficult conversation, doesn't mean that you and the other person are opponents. You can still collaborate in this conversation: partner

together to get through the difficult bits, find a way to connect and even recover together.

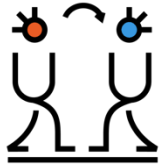


If the conversation becomes tense or stalled, you could go for a walk or move to a different location. Then return to the primary conversation when you are both present and ready to continue. If it's too much, take a break or postpone the conversation. Create a plan together for how to make sure this doesn't keep happening.

It can only make matters worse if you press on if either of you are so full of emotions that you are not able to listen or speak clearly.

Tips for receiving feedback

It is important to learn how to receive feedback. Some people just don't like it, whether it's critical or even appreciative. But we do need to learn how to receive feedback for the sake of teamwork and our own growth.



This may be especially important when the feedback is toxic or there are hot emotions.

Here are some reminders of how to receive feedback graciously. These tips will be useful for calm or stormy situations.

- Feedback is their perspective, not necessarily the truth.
- What they say may be exaggerated by their emotions, try to get beyond the emotional delivery and focus on the content.
- Stay calm, cool and collected.
- Listen for the 2% truth in what they are saying.
- Don't defend your position or explain yourself, just listen to their feedback.
- Say thank you.
- Let them know what you take on and what you will do differently.