

CHAPTER 5

THE ART OF GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

*If you do what you've always done,
you're gonna get what you always got!*

*Yogi Berra
Baseball Player and American Philosopher*

Art Garfunkel sang a very popular song back in the 1970s with the lyrics, "I bruise you, you bruise me. We both bruise too easily." Giving and receiving feedback can be a very tricky proposition. It seems like people can get upset (bruised) so quickly if they are told something that they do not want to hear. Yet, individuals need to be informed of performance problems or they will continue to behave poorly. Unless we realize there is a problem, we cannot correct it. When a team member performs poorly, it is critical that we let him or her know. Or, in the words of Yogi Berra, "you're gonna get what you always got."

The question becomes "how do you communicate the problem to them?" On the other hand, if *you* are the team member who is performing poorly, "how can others tell you without making *you* defensive?" In this chapter, we will review some guidelines for *giving* and *receiving* feedback effectively. We also will present some tips on good listening.

The "How To" of Giving Feedback

Feedback is the process of communicating to individuals information about their behavior or performance on a task; it can occur one-on-one or in a group setting (Schein, 1988). The purpose of feedback should be to improve performance by openly addressing individual and/or team problems. One indication of an effective team is the ability of its members to give and receive feedback constructively. Nonetheless, the process is seldom easy. Team members risk exposing themselves to a variety of reactions when providing feedback to other members — resentment, hurt feelings, embarrassment, anger! However, with some forethought and planning, feedback can help to build trust among teammates and can lead to rewarding experiences for everyone involved.

All of us must realize that providing effective feedback to fellow team members requires tact, diplomacy, and an environment of mutual openness and respect. All members need to view feedback as a way of giving help. Unless individuals are made aware how you perceive their actions, they are likely to continue them. For example, John is consistently a few minutes late for your team meetings. It is becoming a bigger and bigger irritation to you. Unless you inform John how you feel, he cannot satisfy your needs. The key piece in

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the feedback puzzle is to convey the information in such a manner that it is viewed by the member as a “way of giving help.”

Table 5.1 presents several characteristics of effective feedback. Each of these factors can help you structure your feedback to team members. Whether you are completing *The Team Developer* itself, interacting one-on-one with another individual during a feedback discussion session, or simply sharing your perceptions in a team meeting, it is vital that you give feedback that will be constructive and developmental in nature.

Table 5.1
Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Giving feedback is most effective when:

- Both parties (receiver and giver) view it as a way of providing help.
 - It is direct and honest; clearly communicating the problem that needs addressing.
 - You focus on specific issues and behaviors.
 - You provide specific examples and performance incidents.
 - You cite positive information *first*, then the negative.
 - You identify only two or three key areas for improvement.
 - The recipient is involved in developing solutions.
 - It is reciprocated.
 - It gradually moves to a deeper level (e.g., like peeling an onion).
 - It is well-timed.
 - It is checked to ensure clear communication has occurred.
 - Performance expectations are known in advance (i.e., “feed-forward” your expectations).
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Feedback should be direct and honest. If feedback is going to lead to improvement, the receiver has to understand the problem. That is, the giver has to define his or her perception of the problem as clearly and honestly as possible. Returning to the previous example of John’s tardiness at meetings, let us assume another team member (Sara) is getting anxious, because she believes that the team’s work cannot be completed if he continues to arrive late. If she tells John, “I don’t want you to arrive late anymore,” she is really being indirect, telling him only part of the problem. Sara is much more likely to have an impact if she explains to John, “I am concerned that your arriving late will prevent us from getting all of our work done on time.” The advantage of the second approach is that John now has an understanding of how his behavior may effect the team’s performance. Being direct also involves acknowledging and communicating how another’s behavior affects members’ feelings. When Sara told John that she was “concerned,” she was communicating her feelings about the situation. This information let John realize that the problem was not just his lateness, but how it was making her feel. Framing the problem this way is less likely to engender a defensive reaction.

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Feedback should be specific and behavioral in nature. Another important aspect of effective feedback is making sure that it is specific and stated in behavioral terms. This approach means basing it on observation and not on inference or judgement. In addition, the feedback should be related to a specific situation and behavior rather than a general, conceptual, or poorly defined trait. For example, feedback may be stated conceptually as in (a) s/he lacks business sense, (b) s/he has a bad attitude, (c) s/he lacks ambition, or (d) s/he is a poor communicator. These generalizations or global descriptions may seem like an economic form of communication, but they likely will lead to confusion or misunderstanding by the receiver. Further, negative generalizations may lower a person's sense of worth and self-esteem. The impression given is that the individual (not the behavior) is the problem. Moreover, the receiver typically does not know what to do differently when presented with generalized feedback that lacks behavioral definition.

Feedback should be timely. One of the best ways to keep feedback specific is to give it immediately after a behavior has occurred. Keeping feedback recent probably is the best way to ensure that people will understand what you are talking about. It also enables a team to resolve problems before they worsen. In reality, giving immediate feedback may not always be practical. People may not realize something is a problem until sometime later. On other occasions, a problem may be more complex than the team currently has time to devote to it. Moreover, the team may not yet possess the skills to provide effective feedback. In such situations, videotape is an excellent way to retain a visual record for later discussion. At other times, if an issue is particularly sensitive or personal, a team member may decide it is best to speak with an individual in private. When providing feedback to an individual on a one-on-one basis, make sure that you are relatively free from interruptions and distractions.

Use the "feed-forward" technique of giving feedback. We all have heard of the word, "feedback." It pertains to a situation where an individual does something, and subsequently we *feed back* our views of that behavior. The sequence of events is behavior, then evaluation. With "feed-forward," we share our expectations first and make sure the individual knows what we desire. Subsequently, we evaluate them on that expectation. Frequently, people perform behaviors without realizing what we expect. Teams generally are more successful when members recognize what the ground rules are up-front. In other words, members are informed before the fact what other members or the course instructor expect.

The "How To" of Receiving Feedback

When someone gives you feedback via *The Team Developer* or in person, you have a choice. You can deny it — that is not true; that's not how it happened! You can make excuses — I would have been here on time if the bus wasn't late! You can get angry. You can get embarrassed. All those reactions are not very healthy and likely will result in no behavioral improvement. On the other hand, we can approach this feedback from a healthy perspective. We can recognize that no one is perfect, including ourselves. We can view the feedback as an opportunity to grow and improve. We can attempt to understand why the individual feels the way s/he does and reexamine the data from his or

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her perspective. Finally, we can deliberately develop action plans for improving our performance. Hence, we can approach the feedback in terms of *learning >>> growing >>> developing >>> evolving*.

In Table 5.2, we present some of the key characteristics of how to receive feedback. Your team members can be a valuable resource in your professional development. Use them wisely. Take advantage of the feedback they are offering you. Listen with a receptive ear. Make plans to change behaviors and develop your team skills.

Table 5.2
Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Receiving feedback is most effective when:

- You accept the feedback as “reality” for the person giving it.
 - You probe for additional information and examples.
 - You focus on how the feedback can help solve a specific problem.
 - You summarize what you think has been said to assure understanding.
 - You express appreciation for others’ input into your growth.
 - You are committed to improvement.
 - You solicit it regularly.
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Listening — A Critical Skill in the Feedback Process

Obviously, listening is an important aspect when *giving* or *receiving* feedback. An individual must be attentive to what others are saying, then process this information accurately. Hearing is an integral component of listening. However, you also need to be very sensitive to a person’s nonverbal cues in the feedback process. The communication literature consistently has found that nonverbal behaviors are of equal (or greater) importance in person perception than the (verbal) message itself (De Meuse & Erffmeyer, 1994). Consequently, as you “listen” to what other team members are communicating, pay attention to both *what* they are saying and *how* they are saying it.

Keith Davis (1977) formulated a list of guidelines that he entitled, “The Ten Commandments of Good Listening.” These commandments are presented for your information in Table 5.3. We believe they will provide you some sound counsel as you develop your skills to give and receive feedback effectively. In the next chapter, we explore various approaches to managing interpersonal conflict.

Table 5.3
The Ten Commandments of Good Listening

1. Stop talking! You cannot listen if you are talking.
 2. Put the talker at ease. Help the talker feel that s/he is free to talk.
 3. Show the talker that you want to listen. Look and act interested. Do not read your mail or stare out the window while s/he is talking.
 4. Remove distractions. Do not doodle, tap, or shuffle papers.
 5. Empathize with the talker. Try to put yourself in the talker's place so you can see that point of view.
 6. Be patient. Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt.
 7. Hold your temper. An angry team member gets the wrong meaning from words.
 8. Go easy on argument and criticism. This puts the talker on the defensive. Do not argue. Even if you win, you lose.
 9. Ask questions. This encourages the talker and shows you are listening.
 10. Stop talking! This is the first and last commandment because all the others depend on it.
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Note. This table was adapted from Keith Davis (1977), p.387.

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO RESOLVE GROUP CONFLICT

It's easy to get good players. Getting 'em to play together; that's the hard part."

*Casey Stengel
Major League Baseball Player and Coach*

"That is not what I said," Nick asserted!

"Yes, it is! You always feel we should do what you want. Well, this time you're wrong. This time we are doing it my way," Chris retorted.

"Guys, just wait a minute. Why must one of you believe you are always right? How about we call a truce and discuss the issue at hand?"

Another attempt on your part to ease tempers. It seems as though whenever your group gets together you spend half the time arguing. Why can't your group stick to the issues and have a meaningful, *non*-emotional discussion? It is not a matter of being right or wrong. It is a matter of describing the situation at hand, suggesting alternative ways of addressing the problems, and arriving at a well thought-out decision that represents the combined efforts of the entire group. Isn't that what synergy is all about?

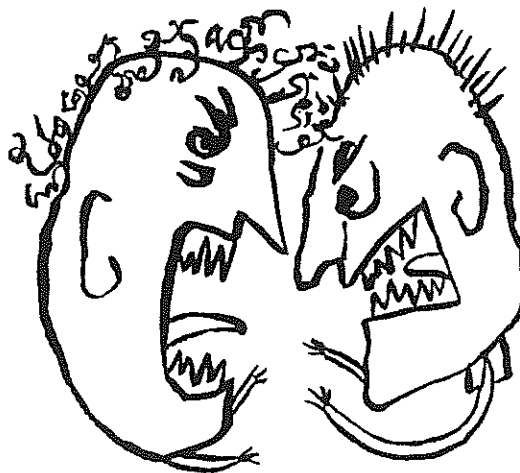


Figure 6.1 Interpersonal conflict can cause many team problems when not managed constructively.

Few people look forward to being in conflict with others. Conflict has the potential of causing interpersonal tension and stress. It can make us feel frustrated, angry, embarrassed, isolated, or perhaps even fearful of being harmed. However,

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most of us recognize that conflict is inevitable. In fact, not only is it inevitable, but it is normal, natural, and even essential for effective group dynamics.

It would be unhealthy and unproductive to avoid interpersonal conflict altogether. As we mentioned earlier, a team's developmental journey includes going through a conflict phase (Stage 2). Teams that attempt to circumvent this stage usually fail to accomplish their goals. After all, one of the key advantages of a team is that it brings together individuals with diverse perspectives, needs, personalities, values, likes, and dislikes.

When properly managed, conflict can become a great resource. The appropriate team environment can encourage members to think creatively, develop new ideas, and work harder to understand each other. *Constructive* conflict can enhance the quality of decision making and actually increase the overall cohesiveness of the team. Unfortunately, when conflict is not dealt with effectively, interpersonal relationships are damaged, communication breaks down, stress goes up, and group performance wanes. Consequently, it is important to ensure that you and your team members know how to deal with conflict constructively. In this chapter, we will examine three different forms of conflict, identify five ways to manage conflict in teams, provide some signs to help you diagnose how your team deals with conflict, and offer some guidelines on how to resolve conflict effectively when it arises in your team.

Types of Conflict

Most team conflicts fall into one of three broad categories. The first type relates to "personality" or "behavioral style differences." Individual differences are inherent in teams and you will find that some members may be easier to work with than others. People may look at the world differently than you or have differences in terms of how they approach their work. The key is to remain respectful of one another's work styles. It is appropriate to take issue with what someone does or how they do it, but you should avoid attacking that person by labeling or stereotyping them. This approach tends to increase tension and seldom lets others know what needs to change.

Another type of conflict can be categorized as "interpretative differences." These conflicts reflect differences about procedures that should be followed, conclusions reached, facts that are important, or theories that should be considered. Such differences are inevitable and, in fact, vital for effective group functioning. When facing this type of conflict, keep the emphasis on the facts. Maintain a problem-solving orientation and avoid bringing personal characteristics into the discussion.

"Interest-based conflicts" have to do with differences in underlying needs, values, goals, and/or access to resources. One of the keys to solving this type of conflict is searching for common ground upon which to build eventual solutions. Although you may have some divergent interests, it is likely that you share some common interests as well. By focusing on them first, you will be more likely to create a cooperative tone for resolving differences. A common mistake when faced with interest-based conflicts is the tendency to confuse interest with position. While an interest is an underlying concern or issue, a position is a particular stance in relation to the concern or issue.

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An example can help illustrate the distinction. Susan asked one of her team members, Jose, for assistance when preparing her part of the report that the team needed to submit. Jose quickly responded that he would not help her. Susan left, feeling frustrated and angry over Jose's lack of cooperation. Jose's *position* was that he would not help Susan. However, what were the *interests* or issues upon which the position was based? If the two members would have continued to explore the conflict by trying to identify underlying interests, they might have been able to reach a mutually beneficial solution. Here are some of the things they could have realized.

- Because they were members of the same team, both shared an interest in ensuring the report was the best it could be.
- Jose's underlying interest was in ensuring that he had enough time to complete his own portion of the report. He worried that if he helped Susan he would not have enough time left.
- Susan's underlying interest was not time, but in ensuring that she include the correct information in the report. Jose, she believed, would be a good source to answer her questions.

Once they had identified each other's interests, at least two solutions would have become apparent. One alternative would be for Susan to help Jose complete his work, so that he would not fall behind after giving her some of his time. A second alternative would be that Jose refer Susan to another person who was equally knowledgeable. By pursuing either of these alternative solutions, their positions would have shifted but their respective interests would have been preserved.

Conflict Management Styles

Another way to think about conflict is in terms of the style or approach that individuals take to resolve it. Thomas and Kilman (1974) identified five general styles. They include (a) avoiding, (b) accommodating, (c) competing, (d) compromising, and (e) collaborating. Each style can be defined in relation to two general dimensions — assertiveness and cooperation. *Assertiveness* reflects a member's willingness to act on behalf of his or her views, interpretations, or interests. It is the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own needs. On the other hand, *cooperation* represents a member's need to get along with others and/or avoid conflict. It is the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's needs. All five of these conflict styles are presented in Figure 6.2. Each of the styles is defined on the following pages.

Avoiding. Teams or individuals that tend toward avoidance are low in cooperation and likewise low in terms of assertiveness. The primary problem with this style of conflict management is that conflicts are never really resolved. Team members simply do not bring them up. Eventually, it may become difficult for a team to make progress, because members never directly address the real issues. Members simply put off interpersonal differences, pretending that they do not exist in the first place or consciously deciding it is not worth the effort to deal with them.

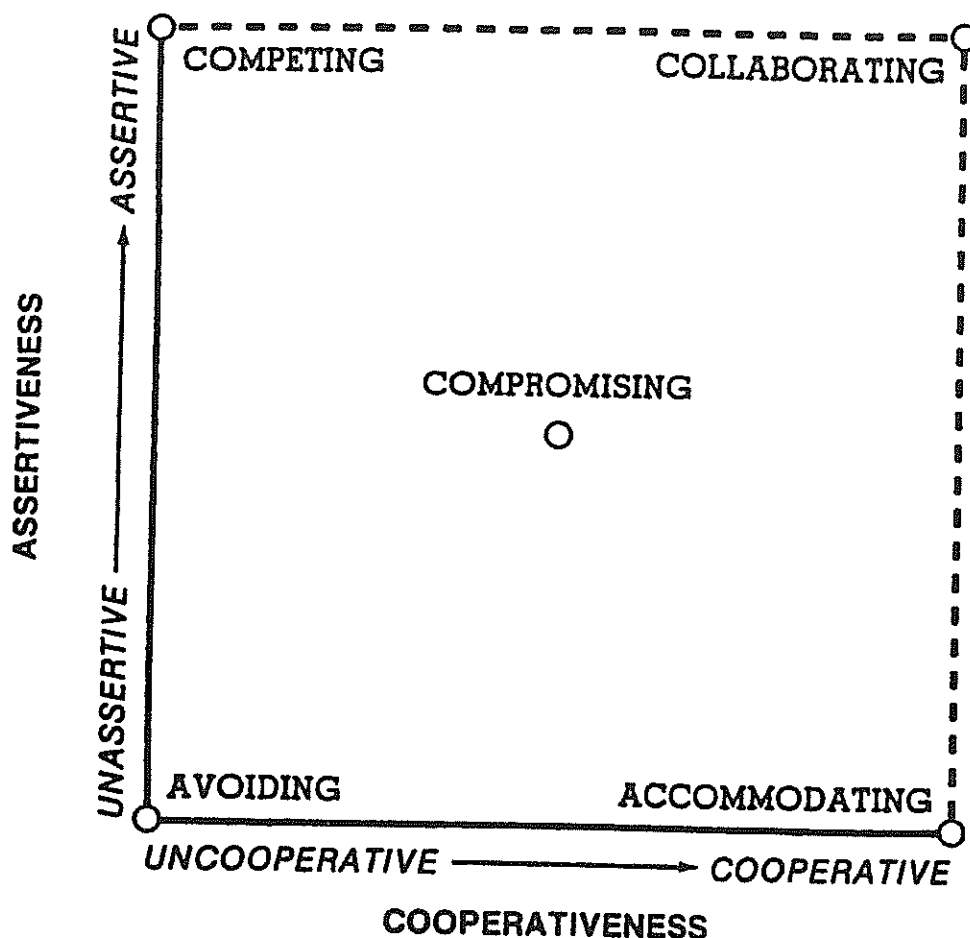


Figure 6.2 Approaches to managing team conflict

Accommodating. This style occurs when cooperation is high but assertiveness is low (see Figure 6.2). “Accommodators” fail to meet their own needs in order to satisfy other members’ needs and avoid conflict. Unfortunately, the tendency to be too accommodating often results in poor team decision making. Individuals are so concerned about the feelings of fellow team members that the best solutions are never fully considered. Further, team members who continuously acquiesce may eventually grow resentful. They will likely come to a point where they explode their emotions on the team.

Competing. The competing style reflects being high in assertiveness and low in cooperation (see Figure 6.2). This approach often creates a contentious environment in which conflicts become escalated. Individuals get locked into satisfying only their own needs. Eventually, team members get so agitated that the team’s goals are often neglected.

Compromising. On the surface, compromising may seem like a reasonable approach. It implies being moderate in terms of both assertiveness and cooperation (see Figure 6.2). However, compromising also implies splitting the difference or meeting in the middle. In many cases, compromise results in a solution that is the least common denominator and the *least* effective. Frequently, the best answer to a problem involves candid discussion, ongoing critique, and the most direct approach regardless of whose idea it might be.

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Collaborating. This style involves being high in terms of both assertiveness and cooperation. Members seek to maximize each other's needs, such as in a "win-win" scenario. Consequently, collaboration is the style most likely to produce optimal and creative resolutions to conflicts. Along the way, team members will build trust in each other and increase their confidence in getting the job performed properly. Collaborators feel comfortable expressing their interests, but want to ensure that other members get their needs met as well.

Diagnosing How Your Team Deals with Conflict

Take a few minutes and attempt to determine which of these five styles best characterizes the way your team handles conflict. After you decide, share your views with other members on the team. Discuss the reasons for your beliefs. Subsequently, discuss the advantages of moving toward a collaborative style to resolving team conflicts. Table 6.1 will provide some information on each style to help in your diagnosis.

Table 6.1
Diagnosing How Your Team Deals with Team Conflict

Some clues that your team may be "avoiding" conflict:

- Do team members usually accept ideas and solutions without thoroughly discussing their pros and cons?
- Do team meetings end without members having a clear idea about what happened or what should occur next?
- Do the same problems or issues keep coming up over and over?
- Do meetings typically start later than planned and/or is there a tendency to get off the subject at once?

Some clues that your team may be too quick to "accommodate:"

- Do members tend to quickly back down on their positions?
- Would you say members on your team are overly polite to one another?
- Do you and/or others feel uncomfortable saying what you really think or feel?
- Do one or two people dominate discussions and action planning?
- Would your team say that keeping everyone happy is more important than finding the best solution to a problem?

Some clues that your team may be in a "competing" mode:

- Do members frequently pass blame on others when things do not go as hoped or planned?
- Can you identify specific cliques or subgroups within your team that always seem to stick together on every issue?
- Is there a tendency to label or stereotype individual members?
- Are members usually reluctant to consider alternatives other than their own positions or ideas?

Table 6.1 (continued)
Diagnosing How Your Team Deals with Team Conflict

Some clues that your team may be in a “competing” mode: (continued)

- Do members get you agitated easily (e.g., if a discussion lasts longer than expected)?
- Do members frequently interrupt or talk while others are speaking?
- Do members lecture one another to convince them that they are right?

Some clues that your team may be too quick to “compromise:”

- Do you settle most differences of opinion by voting?
 - When looking for solutions to problems, would you say your team focuses mostly on incorporating everyone’s position (as opposed to trying to identify the best possible solution)?
 - Is there a general lack of enthusiasm amongst team members for the ways issues are resolved or problems are solved?
 - Does your team avoid vigorous debate on issues or topics?
 - Would you conclude that most of the solutions your team reaches are less than ideal?
 - Do you sense an overall lack of commitment to team decisions?
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Guidelines for Transitioning to a Collaborative Style

The following guidelines will help your team transition to a collaborative approach to resolving conflict:

- 1. Frame conflict in terms of problems to be resolved, rather than by focusing on who should be blamed or held responsible.**
- 2. Develop objective criteria that will help your team evaluate the merits of proposed solutions to conflicts.**
- 3. Consider several alternative solutions and look for ways to combine alternatives in order to develop an ideal solution.**
- 4. Actively listen to one another, taking time to convey an understanding of each other’s points of view.**
- 5. Develop clear follow-up plans to ensure resolutions.**
- 6. Stress the goals and perspectives in *common* among team members.**
- 7. Seek compromise solutions only as a very *last* resort.**
- 8. Encourage, support, and reward candid and frequent communication among team members.**