Among hundreds of educational practices studied, feedback has proven to be one of the most effective. It can have a strong effect on performance and achievement among learners, and its impact can be either positive or negative. The type of feedback and the way it is given determine whether it will be effective and have a positive impact on the learner(Hattie, 2012)*.* Feedback can be formal or informal. It can be used with participants or between trainers to assess performance and support learning goals.

# The Purpose of Feedback

The purpose of feedback is to provide learners with information about how well they are progressing towards their objectives (Wiggins, 2012). When you give feedback, you should provide learners with a description of what you observed, without adding your own personal value judgements. Advice, criticism, and praise are often considered forms of feedback, but they are evaluative instead of descriptive. It is most effective to provide descriptive feedback that will help learners evaluate their own performance and identify steps for improvement(Holden Leadership Center, University of Oregon, 2009).

Feedback communicates how someone’s behaviour has affected us, and it can be an effective tool for maintaining open communication between a trainer and learner. Learners value feedback, especially when it comes from someone whose knowledge, attitude or technical competence they respect (McKimm, J. & Swanwick, T., 2010). In the absence of feedback, learners may assume that there are no areas for them to improve or develop.

Here are two examples of feedback that provides useful information about the achievement of objectives without giving evaluation or advice (Wiggins, 2012):

* A trainer provides feedback to participants on how they organized the cards for the transmission routes game:

*I can clearly see from how you organized the cards, how feces can be transmitted by our fingers to our mouth, by touching food without washing our hands. You also show that when we drink contaminated water feces gets into our bodies. I noticed you did not include the card for flies. How could you incorporate it? In what ways are flies responsible for disease transmission?*

* A colleague provides feedback to a trainer teaching about safe storage containers:

*Your introductory activity was very engaging, and had all the participants focused on you. After you demonstrated washing a safe storage container, all the participants were able to perform the skill correctly. When you began discussing the qualities of a safe storage container, you added a lot of extra information and did not give participants the chance to practice. I noticed they were becoming disengaged. Some were looking at their cell phones, and others were beginning side conversations.*

# Common Mistakes in Offering Feedback

**Generic Compliments:** Although the purpose of feedback is positive (seeking the learner’s success in achieving the learning objectives), the aim should not simply be to have the recipient feel good. While comments such as “You were fantastic,” or “Your presentation was great” may result in positive feelings, they do nothing to help improve the learner’s competence and therefore cannot be considered effective feedback (Jensen, 2012).

**Praise:** Praising participants for their personal qualities or talents can undermine our efforts to motivate learning. Studies show that students who are praised for their intelligence do not seek challenges because they are afraid of failure. They become dependent on praise because it builds their self-esteem. As a result, they avoid challenges that could pose a risk to their self-esteem even when these would increase their competence (Dweck, 2007).

Rather than praising personal qualities, we should praise participants’ efforts. People can control their level of effort; they cannot always control their personal qualities. We should also target our recognition more on the process than the product of the learning. When we praise effort and process participants are motivated to work even harder toward their learning objectives, and are not as discouraged by the obstacles they confront on the way (Dweck, 2007).

**Feedback Sandwich:** A commonly used technique called the “feedback sandwich” presents the weaknesses in a learners work “sandwiched” between positive comments. This technique is meant to maintain the recipients’ positive perception of their work. New research is showing that with this approach the learner either retains only the positive messages at both ends and disregards the important but unpleasant content in the middle, or becomes confused by the conflicting messages (Orlando, 2015).

Positive feedback does not need to be delivered together with constructive feedback. However in the course of a workshop you should deliver a far higher percentage of positive than constructive feedback.



**Principles for Giving Effective Feedback**

The principles below are important to keep in mind while delivering feedback.

* **Offer with Permission:** Feedback should be given when asked for or when the offer for it has been accepted. It should be part of an overall communication process that is based on mutual trust and respect between the learner and the trainer.
* **Link to Learning Objectives**: For feedback to be effective, the recipients must have a goal (even if implicit) and must be taking action to achieve their goal. The feedback should provide information about their actions aimed at achieving the goal. Feedback should help a learner evaluate whether his/her efforts are on track to achieve the learning objectives.
* **Be Specific:** To improve the learner’s competence, the feedback must be very specific, even when it is positive. Learners need to know exactly what they are doing to help or hinder the achievement of their objectives.
* **Describe your personal experience:** The feedback should describe the experience or feelings of the person offering it. It should consist of clear descriptions, relevant information, and should not contain evaluation or advice. The experience of the behaviour should be expressed using “I” (‘When you said…, I thought you were…, and I felt…’).
* **Focus on Behaviour:** Refer to what learners do or say instead of what they are. Focus on behaviours that can be changed, and not on personality traits. Describe observable behaviours, avoid drawing conclusions or ascribing intent.
* **Encourage Reflection:** Feedback should include open questions that encourage reflection on possible alternatives or solutions. Some open questions can include: “Did it go as planned? Why/why not?” “If you were to do it again, what would you repeat and what would you do differently?” “What did you learn from this experience?”
* **Time it Right:** Although not always possible, feedback offered immediately following an event is usually most useful. It is important to ask the recipient to ensure that it is an appropriate time to provide feedback. If they are very busy, tired, or under a lot of stress, it may be more appropriate to wait until they are more relaxed and receptive to hearing your ideas.
* **Lead to Action:** Effective feedback should contain useful information that can lead to specific and concrete actions. Feedback should be linked to the learner’s professional development and encourage actions that will help achieve their learning objectives.
* **Avoid Overloading:** The information shared with learners should be appropriate to their age, technical knowledge and competence level. The feedback should focus on no more than 2-3 key messages and avoid too many details.
* **Acknowledge the positive:** We tend to focus our feedback on what needs to be changed rather than reinforcing positive behaviours. Studies show that to reinforce participants’ self-esteem and motivation we should provide five positive comments for every constructive comment we offer (Zenger & Folkman, 2013).

# Below is an example of a trainer providing feedback on a household visit conducted by a small group of participants. The objective of the visit was to demonstrate how to check a biosand filter in the home of an end user. As you review the example, consider how each of the principles for providing feedback was applied.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Offer with permission & Time it right | *We agreed that I would provide you with feedback after you completed the household visit. Is now a good time?*  |
| Link to learning objectives  | *As I mentioned earlier, the objective of the exercise was to demonstrate how to check a biosand filter in the home of a user.*  |
| Be specific | *You asked the end users effective questions to find out about how they use the filter. You also measured the depth of the standing water correctly.*  |
| Describe your personal experience & focus on behaviour | *I noticed that when you were measuring the flow rate, you timed for over one minute and you did not use a graduated container. I felt concerned that you may not have measured the flow rate accurately.*  |
| Encourage reflection | *What are some steps you could take to measure the flow rate more accurately?**…Do you think the steps we identified are reasonable?* |
| Lead to action  | *Where will you get the graduated container and timer? How could you encourage others in your organization to follow the same procedure?*  |



# A Model for Giving Effective Feedback

Effective feedback should help the learner answer three questions (Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. , 2007):

* Where am I going? (The objective)
* How am I going? (How successful am I at moving toward my objective)
* Where to next? (Next steps, corrective measures, etc., for reaching my objective)

The content and sequence of effective feedback is represented in four different steps, adapted from a model developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2010).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CONTEXT** | **BEHAVIOUR** | **IMPACT** | **NEXT STEPS** |
| Describe the situation. Be as specific as possible.  | Describe the behaviour as clearly as possible, as if watching a film. Avoid drawing conclusions or ascribing intent. | What were the results (positive or negative) of the behaviour? | Encouragement for continued behaviour |
| Discuss solutions or specific changes |
| *When we were discussing waterborne diseases this morning. . .*  | *you provided many examples of illnesses your family has experienced because of a lack of safe water.*  | *Your contribution made the issue of waterborne diseases far more real and relevant for the other participants* | *I really appreciated your contribution. Please continue to share your experiences with the class.*  |
| *When you and I were facilitating the workshop yesterday . . .* | *you were working on your computer at the front of the room when you weren’t leading the group.*  | *The participants were watching you instead of focusing on the activity. When they asked you a question you didn’t respond.*  | *What could you do to make sure the participants stay engaged next time?**…Who could you get support from to make sure you are consistently taking these steps?* |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

Adapted from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010

This four-step model, along with the principles for effective feedback outlined above, can be used to provide feedback in many different contexts.

When used correctly, feedback can be very effective for helping learners meet their objectives. Good feedback is descriptive and given without judgement. It helps learners understand their objective, how well they are progressing towards it, and what they can do to improve. By following the principles and model for delivering feedback, we can effectively support learners and other trainers to make progress towards their goals.

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