How to give redirecting feedback

You can use redirecting feedback to communicate that a behavior you've observed doesn't meet your expectations and that you would like it to change. While reinforcing feedback can feel easier, redirecting feedback is necessary for a team member if:

- *His or her behavior is a serious infraction or has immediate, substantial, and recurring negative consequences.*
- *There won't be an opportunity to use reinforcing feedback instead because the recipient isn't likely to perform the behavior correctly any time soon.*
- *You already tried reinforcing feedback and it didn't work.*
- *The recipient is genuinely comfortable receiving a lot of redirecting feedback.*

When you are giving redirecting feedback, it's important to ensure that recipients clearly acknowledge that there is a problem that needs to be solved, that they have at least some responsibility for fixing it, and that they believe they can make a change. Furthermore you must give the recipient sufficient time, focus and support. If any of these ingredients are missing, the feedback is unlikely to produce a lasting behavior change.

Take care in deciding how much redirecting feedback you give. The right frequency depends on the individuals involved and the situation at hand. You can quickly overwhelm an individual if you ask the person to change more than one or two behaviors at a time. And no matter how calm and accepting a person is, too much redirecting behavior can be demotivating or perceived as criticism. A rough rule of thumb is to give redirecting feedback about once per week per team member, counterbalanced with a healthy amount of reinforcing feedback.

To help you determine the right amount of feedback for your particular situation, you can download our feedback self-assessment.

Key steps

1. **Decide if you should give feedback.**

In some cases, you shouldn't. To find out, ask yourself these questions:

   *Is the behavior really wrong or just different from how you'd do it yourself?* Sometimes different is OK!

   *Is the impact serious enough to justify redirecting feedback?* If the impact is indeed small, consider letting it slide, especially if the recipient will likely figure out on his or her own
that it's not an ideal behavior. Many managers try to correct too many small behavior issues. This can be suffocating for their team.

*Could you use reinforcing feedback instead? Does the individual sometimes perform this behavior correctly?* If so, you could try to give the person reinforcing feedback when you catch him or her doing it right, rather than redirecting feedback now. This can be an extremely effective approach, although it does take longer before you can give the feedback and so should only be used in situations where you can afford to wait.

*What other behaviors is the individual trying to change?* Most people will become overwhelmed if they try to change more than one or two behaviors at a time. However, some behaviors must be dealt with immediately, no matter how many other things the individual is working on. Work performance issues that severely threaten the business operations of your company should be dealt with immediately. Also HR infractions or instances of violence or harassment should be resolved rapidly in a coordinated effort with your HR department.

*Is the individual emotionally ready for feedback?* If you know the person is frazzled, on edge or under a lot of stress, you may want to wait. However, the longer you wait, the less effective the feedback will be, so don't wait too long.

After thinking about all these questions, use your judgment to determine if you should go ahead with the redirecting feedback.

### 2. Prepare thoroughly.

You should spend time carefully planning your redirecting feedback before you initiate the discussion by taking the following steps:

*Identify the specific behavior you've observed and the specific impact that behavior is causing. Be as specific as possible.*

*Choose a good time, ideally within one hour of the behavior, when you can devote at least 15 minutes with no interruptions.*

*Choose a quiet, comfortable, private location to give the feedback.*

### 3. Start the discussion by asking for permission to give feedback.

This will start the discussion with an open and non-threatening tone:

> “Diane, I’d like to give you some feedback about the meeting today. Do you have a few minutes?”
If Diane says no, you should respect her answer and try to schedule a time with her later in the day. But don’t let Diane avoid the feedback entirely. If the feedback is urgent and you can’t afford to hear a no, then you shouldn’t ask for permission.

4. Describe the specific behavior you noticed and its impact.

You could start by saying:

“That Diane, I noticed that you didn’t say anything in our last two meetings, and only spoke up once in the meeting before that. This is our only opportunity to raise production issues with our delivery team, and I’m worried we’re missing important input from you that might cause us to delay our product launch deadline. That would cause a serious problem for the organization.”

Your phrasing is important. Using the phrase “I noticed that …” followed by “… the impact is” can be an effective way to begin a feedback discussion. By saying “I noticed,” you’re positioning your statement as an observation that you are open to discussing. Tying that observation with its impact helps the recipient see the consequences, unintended or not, of his or her actions.

5. Listen carefully to the recipient’s response and react appropriately.

It’s almost impossible to predict how someone will respond to redirecting feedback. You must watch and listen carefully to the person’s response to try to determine what was heard and how he or she feels about it.

There are five common ways that the recipient might respond to your initial statement:

A. Acknowledging the problem and taking responsibility for fixing it. For example, a team member might respond to your feedback by saying, “I know I’ve been too quiet in the meetings and it’s something I really want to get better at. I keep getting tongue tied about how to present my ideas and by the time I’ve figured out a good way to say them, the conversation has moved on. Could you help me work on this?”

This is the easiest situation, and if you hear a similar response, where you can tell with certainty that they agree there is a problem and they are taking responsibility for fixing it, you can skip ahead to Step 7, “Develop an action plan.”

B. Acknowledging the problem but failing to take responsibility for fixing it, or refusing to take responsibility for it. Your team member might say, “I know that I’ve been too quiet in meetings” or “I’ll try to do better, but you know, I’m just a quiet person.” The person might even say, “Well, it’s not my fault!”
If you hear any of these responses, you should try to understand what could be preventing the person from taking responsibility for fixing it, covered in Step 6.

C. Expressing confusion about the problem. The team member might say, “I didn’t realize I was supposed to speak up in the meetings. I thought I was just there to listen and take notes.”

This type of response indicates there is a misunderstanding about your expectations. You need to clarify your expectations and check to see if the recipient agrees they are reasonable. If he or she doesn’t agree, try to understand why and then try to develop a new set of expectations you can both live with. Once you have agreement on both the new expectations and that the observed behavior does not meet those expectations, then you can move on to the next step.

D. Denying that a problem exists. You might hear things like, “That doesn’t sound like a problem to me.” A denial means you should focus on emphasizing the extent of the problem. You should stress the negative impact the current behavior is having on you, the recipient’s co-workers, and the organization. If this doesn’t work, you can explain the negative consequences the behavior will have on the individual’s performance reviews. At this point you may need to involve your HR team. Once the recipient acknowledges that there is a problem, you can move on to the next step.

E. Giving no response, or a very passive one. For example, you might hear a one-word response such as “fine” or “OK” accompanied by passive body language.

Before moving on with the feedback, you need to understand what the person is thinking by drawing out a meaningful response. An effective technique way to do this is to remain silent and wait.

Another technique is to ask open-ended questions like “What is your reaction?” or “Before we continue, I want to make sure you understand what I’ve said. Could you summarize the situation in your own words?” Listen to the other person's response and react accordingly, using the previous guidelines.

6. Help the recipient take responsibility for changing his or her behavior.

The most straightforward approach is to directly ask, “Do you agree that your behavior is contributing to this problem?” or “Do you agree that this is a behavior you need to change?”

If the recipient deflects or avoids responsibility, there might be some outside factor at play. You should try to get past his or her defensiveness by asking open-ended questions to increase your understanding. If there doesn't seem to be an outside factor at play, then you
should continue to present more evidence about the extent of the problem with an emphasis on how the specific behavior has led to the negative impact.

If the person says, “Well, it’s not my fault!” then you can ask whose fault he or she thinks it is. You’ll have to make a judgment call about how to proceed from here. You may want to step back and learn more facts about the incident. Focus on finding solutions without pointing fingers or blaming. This helps you remain neutral and authoritative, and demonstrates that as a team everyone bears responsibility for working together and solving problems.

In some situations, you may need to clearly inform the recipient of consequences if the behavior continues — for example, a written warning or a lower score on the next performance review. In these circumstances, your HR team should most likely be involved and some form of documentation may be required.

7. Develop an action plan.

Once the individual has agreed that there is a problem, a change is needed and it is his or hers to fix, you should work together to develop an action plan. It’s important for the recipient to clearly understand what behavior you expect, and for the recipient to believe that that expectation is reasonable. Expected behavior should ideally be quantitative and measurable, rather than qualitative.

For instance, you could say, “In the future, I’d like you to speak up and add your input on any major discussions we have as a team. Does that sound doable?” If the recipient is hesitant to commit to the expectation, you can ask the recipient to develop an action plan to get there.

In most cases, you’ll see better results if the action plan comes from the recipient rather than from you. An easy way to solicit this input is to ask, “What are some things you could do differently?” or “How do you think you could meet that goal?”

If the recipient is unable to come up with a reasonable plan, you can either give the person more time or make a few suggestions. Try to look for ways to mitigate the negative effects of the incorrect behavior. For instance, you could suggest that if the team member misses a chance to voice her thoughts in the meeting, she could email the team right afterward with them.

8. Summarize the discussion and thank the recipient.

Once you have both agreed to an action plan, it’s helpful for you to summarize what was agreed upon and thank the recipient for his or her effort. A simple thank you goes a long way toward easing some of the tension that surrounds redirecting feedback.

Try saying something like “I’d like to briefly summarize what we talked about today. We both
acknowledged that it’s important for you to voice your thoughts more in our meetings, and we developed a plan with a number of suggestions for us both to help you get there. Thank you for your effort in this. I think it will have a big impact on the quality of our meetings and the performance of our team.”

9. **Provide ongoing support.**

After the discussion is over, be sure to provide reinforcing feedback every time the recipient improves his or her behavior, especially the first time. Don’t overload the person with too many additional behavior change requests at once. And give the person sufficient time to make the changes. People can’t change overnight.

If you notice that the behavior is not improving, then you should gently ask the recipient how the agreed-upon action plan is going and if there is anything further you can do to help. If there is still no improvement, then you should go through the redirecting feedback process again to make sure everything is well understood. If there is still no progress, then you may have to involve your HR department and resort to disciplinary techniques beyond the scope of our resources.

Next: How to build a feedback culture

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