

MAKE FEEDBACK NORMAL

How leaders create the conditions for difficult conversations.

By Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood

Most leaders spend a great deal of time thinking about what to say when they need to give difficult feedback. They plan the opening sentence, soften the wording, gather examples, and try to anticipate how the other person might respond.

Those things matter. But the success of a difficult conversation is rarely determined by the perfect sentence.

It is shaped by everything that happened before the conversation began.

What is the relationship like? Does this person know that you see their strengths as well as their mistakes? Is feedback a regular part of working together, or does it only appear when something has gone wrong? Have you shown that you are also willing to receive feedback? Do people experience you as someone who genuinely wants to help them improve, or as someone who evaluates them from a distance?

You cannot guarantee how another person will respond to difficult feedback. You can create conditions that make it more likely they will be able to hear it, consider it, and use it.

BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP FIRST

Feedback lands differently when it comes from someone we trust.

Trust does not require friendship, constant agreement, or years of history. It develops when people experience a leader as consistent, fair, curious, and invested in their success. It grows when the leader takes time to understand who they are, what they care about, what they are trying to accomplish, and how they experience their work.

This does not mean leaders need to earn the right to address urgent or harmful behaviour. Some situations require immediate clarity. But even then, the existing relationship will influence how the

feedback is received.

A relationship cannot be created entirely within the conversation in which someone is being told they need to change. Build it during ordinary moments. Ask questions when nothing is wrong. Notice effort and progress. Follow up on things people have told you. Be present when there is no problem to solve.

When people know that you see the whole of them, they are less likely to experience corrective feedback as the whole story about them.

NORMALIZE FEEDBACK BEFORE IT BECOMES DIFFICULT

If feedback only happens when something has gone wrong, people will naturally learn to fear it. The words “Can I give you some feedback?” become a warning. A meeting request creates anxiety. People begin protecting themselves before they even know what the conversation is about.

Make feedback a normal part of how your team works.

Give it regularly, while moments are still small and specific. Name what people are doing effectively so they know what to repeat. Offer coaching when an adjustment could help. Ask questions that encourage people to evaluate their own performance. Make conversations about learning part of the work rather than something reserved for formal reviews.

Feedback also needs to move in more than one direction. Ask people what they need from you. Invite them to identify what is helping and what is making their work harder. When they offer something difficult, resist the urge to explain yourself immediately. Listen long enough to understand their experience.

The leader teaches the team what feedback means by how they give it and how they receive it.

If feedback is regular, specific, and reciprocal,

difficult feedback may still be uncomfortable, but it will not feel like a sudden change in the relationship.

KNOW WHAT KIND OF FEEDBACK YOU ARE GIVING

Not all feedback serves the same purpose.

Appreciation communicates that someone and their contribution are seen. Coaching is intended to help someone learn, adjust, or improve. Evaluation explains where someone stands in relation to an expectation or standard.

Teams need all three, but problems arise when they are blended without clarity.

A leader may believe they are coaching while the employee hears a formal evaluation of their competence. Appreciation followed immediately by criticism can feel less like recognition and more like an attempt to make the criticism easier to deliver. Coaching can also feel disingenuous when a decision about performance has already been made.

Before the conversation, ask yourself: What kind of feedback am I giving? What does this person need to understand by the end? Am I appreciating, coaching, evaluating, or moving between them?

If you are moving between them, make the transitions clear.

Clarity helps people understand what the feedback means, how seriously to take it, and what they are expected to do next.

PREPARE YOURSELF, NOT JUST YOUR MESSAGE

Difficult feedback is not only challenging for the person receiving it. Leaders bring their own histories, emotions, assumptions, and habits into the room.

Some leaders become overly careful and leave the message unclear. Some become more forceful when they feel nervous. Some rush the conversation, talk too much, or avoid asking questions because they are afraid of where the discussion might go.

Notice what happens to you when tension rises.

Do you try to regain control? Speed things up? Fill the silence? Become overly positive? Withdraw? Defend your credibility? Start building a case rather than having a conversation?

Then decide how you need to carry yourself to serve the moment well. You may need to slow down, listen more, become clearer, tolerate silence, or remain steady while someone has a strong reaction.

Prepare the facts but prepare your nervous system too. Difficult feedback is more likely to be useful when it is delivered by a leader who is grounded enough to remain clear, caring, and curious.

BALANCE THREE PRIORITIES

A difficult feedback conversation asks a leader to hold three priorities at the same time: the objective, the relationship, and self-respect.

The objective is what the conversation needs to accomplish. What needs to be understood, addressed, or changed?

The relationship is how you treat the person while working toward that objective. Can you remain respectful and curious, even when the message is difficult?

Self-respect means remaining aligned with your own values and responsibilities. Can you say what needs to be said without becoming harsh, apologizing for the expectation, or avoiding the issue altogether?

When leaders focus only on the objective, people can feel managed rather than developed. When they focus only on the relationship, the message can become so gentle that its importance is lost. When leaders become preoccupied with protecting themselves, they may become defensive or controlling.

Effective feedback gives appropriate weight to all three.

LOOK BACK CLEARLY

Useful feedback needs a clear looking-back component: Here is what I noticed.

Describe the behaviour, decision, or performance

as specifically as possible. Explain the criteria or expectation you are using. Identify the impact without turning the behaviour into a judgment about the person's character or potential.

There is an important difference between "You are careless" and "There were three pieces of information missing from the report, which meant the team could not complete the next step."

The first statement defines the person. The second identifies something that can be examined and changed.

Your intentions are largely invisible to other people. Their intentions are largely invisible to you. What others experience is behaviour and impact, and from that they create a story about what happened.

Feedback helps close this gap, but only if both people remain open to learning more.

Share what you observed, then ask for their perspective. There may be information you do not have. Your interpretation may need to expand. Being open to additional context does not require you to abandon the feedback. It allows you to understand the situation more fully before deciding what happens next.

EXPECT HUMAN RESPONSE

Even thoughtfully delivered feedback can activate a strong response.

The person may believe the feedback is wrong, unfair, or unhelpful. They may question whether you understand the situation. The feedback may touch a larger fear about their competence, identity, future, or place on the team. They may also react to the relationship: "After everything I have done, this is what you think of me?" or "Why should I accept this from you?"

Do not assume that an emotional response means the conversation has failed.

Slow the moment down. Listen for what is underneath the reaction. Is the person challenging the facts, the meaning of the feedback, the way it was delivered, or the relationship itself? More than one of those conversations may need to occur.

Useful questions include: "Tell me more." "What

does not fit for you?" "What am I missing?" "What is the story you are taking from what I said?" and "What problem do you think we need to solve?"

Listening does not mean withdrawing the message. It means making enough room to understand the response before moving forward.

LOOK FORWARD TOGETHER

Feedback also needs a looking-forward component: Here is what needs to happen next.

Do not leave someone with a clear description of what went wrong and no practical way to improve it. Identify the expected change, why it matters, what support is available, and when you will revisit it.

Where possible, involve the person in determining the next steps. Ask what they believe needs to change, what could help, and how progress should be measured. People are more likely to take ownership when they participate in building the path forward.

Be clear about what is negotiable and what is not. Collaboration does not mean lowering necessary standards. It means treating the other person as an active participant in their development.

Then follow up. Difficult feedback should not become a heavy conversation followed by silence. Notice progress. Continue coaching. Revisit the plan. Adjust where necessary.

The goal is not simply to deliver feedback. It is to help create meaningful change.

CREATE THE CONDITIONS

Leaders cannot make difficult feedback painless, and that should not be the goal. Growth can be uncomfortable. Accountability can be uncomfortable. Hearing that our intentions did not create the impact we hoped for can be uncomfortable.

The goal is to make feedback clear, respectful, expected, and usable.



Build the relationship before you need to rely on it. Make appreciation, coaching, and evaluation regular parts of working together. Show people that feedback moves in both directions. Prepare yourself to stay grounded when the conversation becomes difficult. Be specific about what happened, remain curious about what you may not know, and create a clear path forward.

The strongest feedback cultures are not those in which every conversation goes perfectly. They are cultures in which people know that mistakes can be examined, concerns can be named, and difficult truths do not have to threaten belonging.

Do not wait for a difficult conversation to create the conditions for honest feedback.

Create them now.

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SOURCES & FURTHER READING

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