

What makes Feedback Powerful? And how can we do it well?

This practical guide will help you become a better colleague
and leader by tapping into the power of feedback



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'Continuous delivery without continuous feedback is very, very dangerous'

Colin Humphreys, British physicist

Done well, feedback builds engaged relationships, improves results and deepens trust. And yet the idea of 'feedback' often strikes fear into us, because we've all seen the effect of poorly thought through, or badly delivered criticism.

If you'd like to power up your impact through effective feedback, this guide is for you. Whether you lead a team or not, the gift of feedback is available to everyone and this guide will help you understand what real feedback is and how to make it powerful.

Feedback isn't just for Performance Reviews

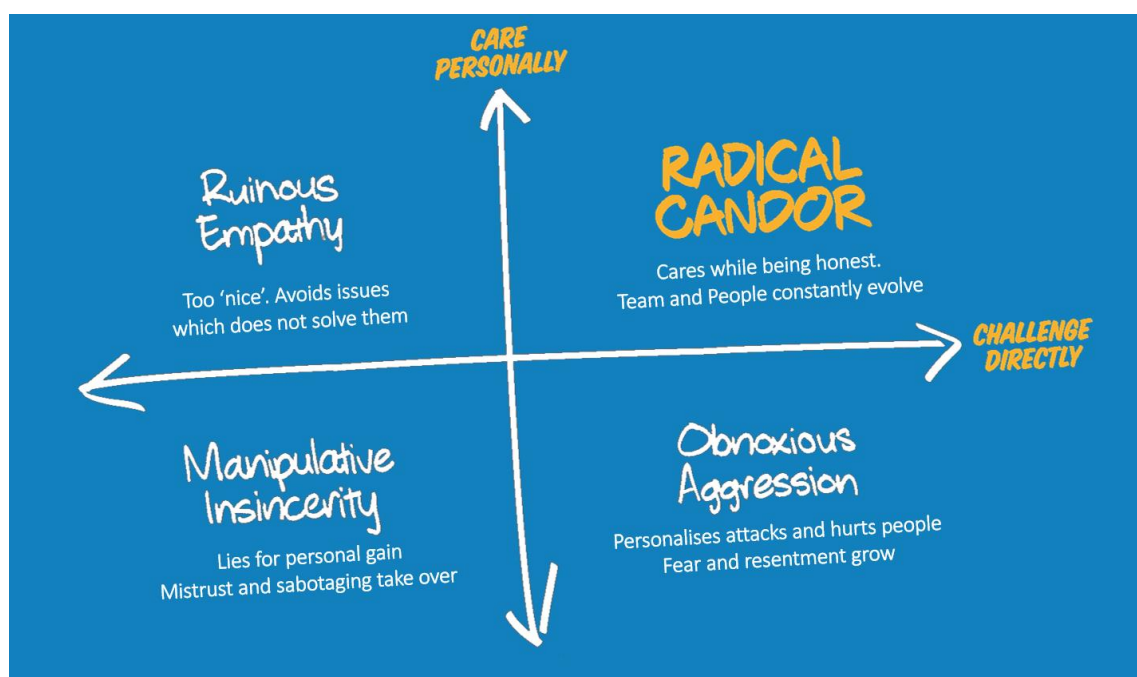
Feedback is simply a way to help each other understand the impact of our actions and behaviour and to explore ways to grow. Expressed like this, we can probably agree it's something we want to do every day. Yet feedback is often treated as something to do when something goes wrong or at the annual Performance Review.

But how can this be effective if it's so infrequent?
How can we expect to be good at something we only do once a year?
And are we only interested in feedback from our immediate boss?

For feedback to be effective, it needs to be timely and regular, making it 'part of the way we work with each other'. This helps us cultivate the skill on a daily basis. So when you see something you can offer feedback on, don't hold back.

Whilst it's easier to celebrate rather than challenge, it's damaging to 'walk past' an important observation. If we think we're being kind in not mentioning a problem, we're falling into the trap Kim Scott calls 'ruinous empathy'.

Scott's [Radical Candor](#) 4 box grid is useful in helping us recognise what happens when we're too 'nice' or too 'obnoxious' in our feedback. Great feedback happens at the intersection of Caring Personally and Challenging Directly.



We don't listen to people we don't trust and to build trust we need to listen

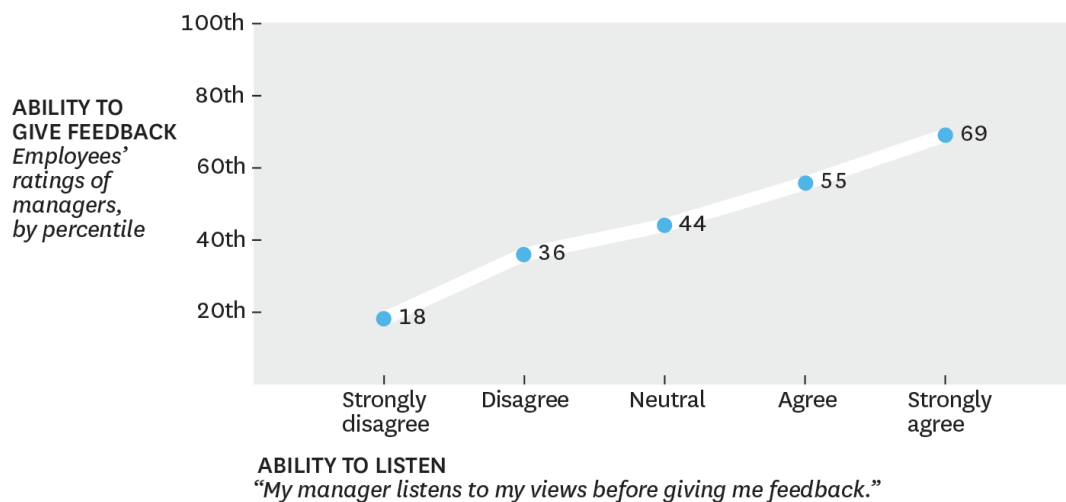
How often do we take on board feedback or advice from someone we don't trust?
For me it's almost never. And I'm not alone.

It's hard to separate the content of a conversation from the person delivering it and it's almost impossible when that content is about us. In other words, there's no such thing as powerful feedback from someone you don't trust.

So, we must build trust before we seek to deliver feedback that will land well, because the recipient must see us as a credible source of development advice. Critically, the person we're sharing feedback with, must believe we have their interests at heart.

Trust is built over time and enhanced through shared experiences and challenges that test and reinforce the foundations of a relationship. There may not be a shortcut to building trust, but one dependency to building trust in any relationship is our capacity to listen.

The More You Listen, the Better Employees Think You Are at Giving Feedback



SOURCE ZENGER/FOLKMAN

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This chart (reproduced from the [HBR article on the assumptions we make about feedback](#)) clearly shows the correlation between how effective managers are in providing feedback and their ability to listen. Listening is freely available to all of us and yet is probably the most critical yet underrated leadership skill.

If you want your feedback to be more powerful, listen first, speak second.

Listening (really listening) to others has an added benefit too. Aside from deepening our understanding of the situation and building trust, by listening we inject a pause in our own reactions, giving us time to check we are coming from a place of respect and support, rather than irritation or anger. If you recognise you have heightened emotions, inject this pause before you offer any feedback or you may regret the way you handle the situation.

There is also something in listening that allows us to see that 'feedback is just feedback'- meaning it's someone's point of view, an opinion. It's not fact. Discussing what we're seeing, feeling and experiencing helps us normalise feedback and hold it more lightly, as part of our everyday exchanges with colleagues.

Feedback is a two-way street, so use both sides

“We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.” Bill Gates

To understand the impact we’re creating we need to ask for feedback from our team members, peers and colleagues. Here is where listening comes to the fore. How we respond to feedback will set the tone for the culture we’re building. Staying curious, asking for ‘more’ and probing for suggestions for change and growth, are essential to building a trusted environment where people feel comfortable offering constructive feedback, even to those more senior than them.

Building a habit of asking for feedback is a great way to gain insight into how our behaviour affects others. Without candid insight it can be a struggle to see how we can improve, or to identify the development areas that will build our leadership ability. To make it easier for people to offer feedback, I’ve found it useful to ask a specific question such as ‘what’s one thing I could start doing, or stop doing that would improve my impact?’ People can usually offer feedback on ‘one thing’ and in addition to gaining specific insight, by demonstrating an openness to listen without responding or defending you will be building trust.

All feedback is important, so mix it up

We’ve been programmed to think of feedback as criticism and I think this is a mistake. I said earlier ‘feedback is simply a way to help each other understand the impact of our actions and behaviour and to explore ways to grow’ – so let’s explore 3 different types of feedback, each just as important as the others.

3Cs for powerful feedback

I think of feedback as 3 different Cs - Celebrate, Coach and Course Correct. This reminds me that feedback is neutral until we attach content to it. Feedback is not inherently negative, in fact it’s MORE important to offer positive, reinforcing feedback than it is to criticise. [Research shows](#) the optimum ratio of positive to negative feedback is 6:1 - so let’s start by celebrating and do it regularly!

1. Celebrate

“There are two things people want more than sex and money... recognition and praise”
Mary Kay Ash, American Businesswoman.

Positive feedback not only motivates us to continue to develop but it also signposts what we can do more of. Praise feels authentic when it’s informal and spontaneous, so say it when you see it. The heartfelt ‘well done, I really appreciated the way you’ will go further when offered in the moment and in front of others.

So don’t hold back, take every opportunity to role model positive, specific, reinforcing praise to celebrate actions and behaviours you want to see more of and to reinforce the diverse, personal strengths you recognise in the people around you.

2. Coach

This second type of feedback is our 'go to' technique for managing performance and it's more about **noticing** than directing.

Your aim here is to shine a light on something specific and probe for more information, to deepen mutual understanding of the situation and explore options for growth. This type of feedback injects a pause, so together you can explore what happened rather than immediately judging or correcting.

This type of feedback calls for an open approach, so avoid using 'You ...' statements or questions, the key is to remain neutral, so together you can explore what happened and what options are available going forward.

Useful questions in the coaching style of feedback include:

- How would someone outside of our team describe what happened?
- What steps or strengths did we engage/ or were missing to us?
- How could we have engineered a different result?
- What behaviours did we use to achieve this outcome?
- What other options might have been available to us?
- What have we learnt from this experience?
- What will we do differently next time?
- Have we remained true to our shared values in achieving this outcome?

This approach is vital when the situation is complex and it's also useful when you see unusual or disappointing behaviour from someone you trust.

In almost all situations, I advise leading with a coaching style of feedback ahead of the third style of feedback – Course Correction.

3. Course Correct

"Continuous improvement is better than delayed perfection" Mark Twain, American Author

We all see situations, behaviours and outcomes we think call for course correction. And we are often wrong, because we're not in possession of the facts and/or are judging the situation from a biased or flawed perspective. We all have different ways of working and that's a good thing.

Great leaders encourage innovation and diversity, not uniformity.

We **must speak up** when we see things that concern us, but it is usually advisable to start with a coaching approach, so we understand the context and engage the person in conversation that leads to greater insight.

However, there are situations that cross this coaching threshold, where we must deliver feedback with the aim of changing activity or behaviour that is unacceptable or damaging to the business and the people within it. This calls for a direct approach, which can be tough.

We often avoid giving challenging feedback because we don't want to cause distress to others. Yet giving tough feedback is often the best way to **avoid causing distress**, as long as it's delivered in an effective way.

So how do we do that?

Unless you're in a situation where time is absolutely critical, I recommend starting with a coaching style and focusing on listening to understand, not to respond. Deepen your knowledge of the situation, the emotions at play and the results or outcomes, before you offer specific direction.

Don't delay. Don't leave it to fester and for memories to become unreliable, but be conscious in achieving the right context for a constructive discussion. Any course correction must be done in a confidential way. Praise in public, correct in private.

'Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind' Brene Brown, American Professor. If you need to offer constructive, negative feedback, be very specific, using examples and simple language. Repeat key phrases and ask the person to play back what they've heard. Brown has a very good approach for what she calls 'engaged feedback' and whilst this is covered in full in her book [Daring Greatly](#), here is a [handy checklist](#) you may find useful.

We've distilled our best 3 tips for preparation that will make the outcome of your 'difficult feedback' more positive:

1. Get crystal clear on the key message you want to impart; the 1 or 2 sentences at the crux of your message. Don't blur or dilute these words as this leads to confusion.
2. Focus these words on the reaction you had to what the person did, rather than what they did, "I found it hard to speak" is more powerful than "you didn't let me speak".
3. Rehearse your key message, in confidence with someone else, so you get used to delivering the words, ahead of delivering the feedback.

Avoid making assumptions that can make delivering tough feedback even tougher – [read the excellent HBR article](#) (referenced previously in this guide) for more on this.

The most important thing you can do to improve your feedback skills is to start giving (more) of it and start asking for (more) of it. Like most leadership skills, feedback is best learnt through doing, rather than studying.

There are many frameworks available to help develop the habit of providing feedback and we've included three of our favourites here. As you create more feedback you will develop your own natural style.

Useful Frameworks to power up your Feedback

Technique 1: I like, I wish, I wonder

The concept of this is simple as feedback is generated by reflecting on 3 thoughts:

1. I like - the positive aspect you want to highlight, focus on specifics, give examples and relate this back to the person's strengths and behaviours.
2. I wish - what you want to see more of, explore how that could happen.
3. I wonder - what are they prepared to try and what support do they need?

Technique 2: CORE

Created for Course Correction feedback, ensuring it is specific and clear by focusing on the:

Context - When did X occur? Who was involved?

Observation - What happened? What specific actions and behaviours did you notice?

Reaction - What was the effect on you, others and business?

Expectations - What do you need to happen next and in the future?

Technique 3: Stop, Start, Continue

A framework to ask for or deliver feedback in 3 action oriented steps:

1. Stop - Explore what needs to stop.
2. Start - Explore what you could start.
3. Continue - Confirm what is working well so you can amplify it.

It's really important to tailor all feedback to make it specific and individual. Use what you know about the person to ensure you have a constructive conversation and to choose the most appropriate approach for them. Knowing our colleagues well helps us make the right choices about the timing, the context and how we have the conversation. If you're offering feedback to someone you don't know well, ask if they're open to feedback first and if they are, how they would like to receive it.

However much you prepare, these conversations can be uncomfortable - and that's OK! It takes time to build trusting relationships and this is an investment worth making for everyone involved.

Giving feedback to, and even asking for it, can be especially uncomfortable when the person you're engaging with is in a more senior role, or is more experienced or more expert than you. This situation can bring our self confidence into doubt, adding to our anxiety. If you recognise this challenge, we have loads of practical advice in our [Nkuzi Change Guide on How to Build Self Confidence](#) which is free to download.

We hope this guide on Powerful Feedback is useful to you. If you've found it useful, we'd love you to visit www.nkuzichange.com where you will find more articles to support your leadership journey.

And connect with us on LinkedIn: [Elise Finn](#) and [Kate Franklin](#).

At Nkuzi Change we work with people keen to develop, as they care about the quality of their relationships and their leadership. We help organisations unlock the full potential of their people through coaching that is focused and directed, inclusive and scaleable.