

The Art of Re-Framing

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Giving feedback, especially challenging feedback, often evokes defensiveness. This is especially true when we use words that are loaded or have a pejorative connotation (e.g., “manipulative,” “irresponsible,” etc.). These words may, indeed, accurately reflect your impressions or judgments. However, how you say them can make all the difference in terms of the *impact* it has on the receiver. If the other person cannot hear what you have to say, because of the way you are saying it, then you are creating barriers to effective communication.

Giving difficult feedback requires some tact. It requires an ability to say the hard truths clearly and directly without putting the other person down. One of the most important things to remember is to use *descriptive* rather than *evaluative* language or labels. Giving feedback is one skill where conciseness (i.e., using labels) is less important than finding the right words, caring words, which describe their behavior. Re-framing is the art of saying what you want to say using more palatable words. It means taking a potentially loaded word and describing the behavior – re-framing it. It means sharing your observations without using the pejorative label.

Re-framing is not about changing the truth or putting a selective “spin” on the truth. Rather, it is about re-arranging the words that express the truth. For example, some people can take a scarf, a candle, a booklet and some flowers and make a beautiful centerpiece. Using that same material, if arranged with less of an artistic flare, could easily result in something less than beautiful (i.e., same material, different impact). Some picture frames enhance the picture inside whereas others diminish its beauty. We are searching for frames that will enhance, not change, the picture (i.e., same picture, different impact). In other words, we are looking for words that enhance the listener’s capacity to hear the truth (i.e., same truth, different impact).

Re-framing, like creating centerpieces, is an art. Some people have a knack for it while others do not. Most of us, however, can develop some skill with a little practice. There are habits that get in the way and skills that can help. The number one habit to break is the labeling itself. You must learn to describe, rather than label. In addition, you need to make an internal effort to shift your judgements (i.e., a narrow perspective) about their behavior and allow yourself to become more open. You need to internally work at opening yourself up to allow for a variety of possibilities for construing their behavior that only an enlightened conversation might bring. You must ready yourself to invite a dialogue of exploration, rather trying to pin them down with a label. Thus, the re-framing is an internal shift as much as it is a shifting of the style of giving feedback.

Four Steps to Feedback

In order to practice this artful discipline of re-framing, try to follow these four steps. Once you have written out your feedback, use the *Checklist for Evaluating your Preparation* as a final check for your work.

1. Share your observations: Be “descriptive”, not evaluative or judgmental

Describing their behavior is key. Do not evaluate, judge or label. This is the heart of re-framing. Tell them what you noticed, what you heard them say, what you observed or what you experienced. Remember, you can’t notice feelings or hear what someone is thinking. You can only infer these based on what you observe. You can’t know what their inner truth is (without asking). Begin with phrases like: “*I noticed that ...*”; “*I observed ...*”; “*When I said ..., you said*” Give a couple of examples, but don’t overload them with examples to build a case.

One way to begin to get more descriptive might be to think of a dictionary definition of the word that you are trying to re-frame. Ask yourself if their behavior matches? Think of their behavior. For example, if you think they are depressed, then ask yourself: What is depression? What are they doing or saying that is telling me they are depressed? What does depression look like? Paint a picture of depression in words, using their behaviors.

2. Tell them about the impact: Be “direct”, not impersonal

Being *open* and *direct* is key. What happened to you when they said what they said (or did what they did)? How were you affected? How did you feel? What did you do? What did you think? Don’t hide behind your feedback. Don’t be anonymous. Don’t speak for others. Speak for yourself. Use phrases like: “*When that happened I felt ...*”; “*When you said that I thought ...*”; “*When you did that I ...*” [what you did].

3. Offer your inference: Be “tentative”, not conclusive

Being *tentative* is key. Don’t tell them what they *really* felt, what they were thinking. Offer your wondering with the recognition that it might not fit for them. If you come across as if you know them better than they know themselves you will invite defensiveness. Begin your inferences with phrases like: “*I wonder if...?*” “*One of my hunches was ...?*” “*Could it be ...?*” You must not come across as if you know what they *really* think or feel. You also must recognize this internally. If you believe you have them pegged, that you know them better than they know themselves, you have more personal preparation to do.

4. Check it out: Be “invitational”, not accusational

Invitation is the key. Invite them to into a conversation not an inquisition (i.e., having to explain themselves). Convey your desire to understand and talk with them. Use phrases like: “*Does what I am wondering match your experience (feeling, thinking)? Can you help me understand...?*” Or simply end your hunch with an inflection in your voice that conveys your question and your interest in hearing their response.

Checklist for Evaluating your Preparation

What follows is a checklist you can use to ensure that your feedback has been well prepared. In order to evaluate your preparation efforts, ask yourself the following questions:

Did you get rid of all of the loaded words?

Describe rather than label! Look at your entire feedback and make sure that you are not using words that are loaded, evaluative, judgmental or laced with sarcasm. Read and re-read your description and make sure that no loaded words are lurking around camouflaged by lots of other words.

Are you direct?

Your feedback should be a direct (i.e., me – you) conversation. Do not just speak to them *about* them. Put yourself in the conversation by talking *with* them about the impact of their behavior on you. What difference does it make for you? Speak for yourself, not others.

Are you concrete?

You need couple of examples in your description. One example is often insufficient while four or more is too many (it will sound like you're building a case against them). Don't pile it on. You need at least one example, however, to make it concrete. Remember, to not use blanket words (e.g., always, never, everyone, every time, everything, etc.). Be specific.

Is your feedback clear?

Do they know what you are trying to say? Would anyone listening to this feedback know the word (if it were used) that you are trying to describe behaviorally?

Is your inference tentatively offered?

Is it tentative and are you open to another interpretation of what their behavior is about? Not only your words need to be open and tentative, but also your internal judgements. If you are using descriptive words, but you think to yourself, "I know darn well they are really..." (your judgment) then you have more work to do? You have to make room for being wrong. Could there be any other possible explanation or reason for their behavior other than what you have judged it to be? Be tentative and stay open.

Are you inviting dialogue?

Are you inviting dialogue and exploration or are you seeking a confession or an apology. Prepare yourself for, and invite, dialogue and exploration. Seek understanding.

How would you handle it?

A final litmus test for your preparation efforts is to think how you would handle this feedback if you were on the receiving end. Put yourself in their position. Is the feedback offensive or does it invite you into dialogue? Does it sound accusational or invitational? Run it by someone else if you're not sure. Let them help you edit it. Good luck!