

How to Give Negative Feedback Well

By Lyndsay Swinton

Giving negative feedback sucks. Period. It's uncomfortable for you and it's uncomfortable for the person hearing it. But no matter how much you twist and turn to avoid it, giving negative feedback may be the kindest way to change behaviour. And believe it or not, there are ways of delivering it that make it less painful for all parties involved.

Tough Management Love

Your team is complaining - Tony's smelly feet are putting them off their work. What do you do? Ignore it? Open the window? Or do you talk to Tony?

So you decide to ignore it. What happens then? Your team thinks you don't listen to them and gradually your communication channels shut down. Ignoring the issue is not going to make it go away.

You decide to open the window, as you don't want to embarrass Tony. Problem is that most modern office windows don't open so that the air conditioning works. Even if you could open the window, you've avoided tackling the real problem.

So you pluck up the courage to have a chat with Tony. From this you discover he has recently split up from his partner and has been sleeping on a friend's couch and living out of a ruck-sack. No-one in the team knew this, and Tony didn't know how to mention it. You chat about the situation and Tony feels better for it. Bet you didn't expect that to happen!

(This is a real example - names have been changed to protect identities.)

This conversation could have gone horribly wrong. But it didn't as it's possible to give negative feedback well.

1. Choose your time and place

Always give negative feedback in private. Book a room or office where you will not be disturbed, out of view of curious eyes.

2. Tissues at the ready

Good managers have a constant supply of tissues (if only to mop up the blood when they punch you on the nose ; >) You may get an emotional response and it's easier on the person if they can tidy themselves up without rushing to the toilet.

3. Check ears open and ready to receive

Make sure the person is ready to listen by checking they have time to spend with you, and not rushing off to a meeting or some other time pressure. You need their full attention to ensure the message is received and understood.

The request would sound something like this.

"Hi Tony, I would like 10 minutes to talk with you about something. Have you got the time right now or would you prefer we catch up later?"

If now is not the time, then arrange to meet later and make sure you give yourself plenty time for the chat.

4. Cut to the chase

Now you're in the room, minimise pain by getting to the point quickly. Be sincere, be specific and focus only on the problem in hand.

"Hi Tony. Thanks for taking time to talk to me. I feel a bit uncomfortable saying this so bear with me. I've noticed over the past few days that your shoes are a bit smelly and the odour is kind of unpleasant to work with. I've never noticed this before – has something happened to cause this?"

Think through the key points you want to make beforehand, and think through how they might react and plan your responses accordingly. Maybe role-play what you want to say with a trusted colleague and practice getting the words out of your mouth.

Consider your body language and the effect that may have. Sitting Tony on a desk opposite you may be good if you want a physical barrier, but it may be more effective to sit alongside so you both face the problem together.

5. Let them speak

Tony is more than likely going to be a bit shocked by this, so give him a bit of time to let the information sink in and to respond. Use all your best active listening skills to bring the person out, and find out why the situation has arisen.

6. Best behaviour

Don't leave your person guessing what you'd like them to do. Tell them what you would prefer. If you don't, they'll never know quite what to do.

"Tony, thanks for telling me about that. What I would like is for you to maybe change your work shoes, or wear something more appropriate in the office"

Being clear about what you want is especially important when the negative feedback is a blind spot for them. Sometimes people do not see their behaviour as being in any way problematic and have no idea what to do to change it. It's up to you to spell it out to them.

7. Right to choose

A person has the right to act upon your feedback or ignore it completely. It's their choice. Depending on your work relationship, it may be your responsibility to address the issue again. If not, maybe enlist help from a senior colleague and tackle the behaviours by different means.

Every cloud has a silver lining

Giving negative feedback is never going to be easy, but it can be less painful. Be sure about why you are giving the negative feedback, plan when and where you will give it and be ready to listen. Although acutely embarrassed Tony was glad he had the opportunity to air his personal problems. Use these techniques for giving negative feedback and you will be pleasantly surprised!

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