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Effective Feedback Needs Clarity And Care

Why is it so hard to give and receive feedback in a way that leads to positive results? Feedback is an integral part of our lives, whether at work, in education or in personal relationships – and it can be difficult to get it right.

Different personalities react to feedback in different ways – and everyone has an emotional reaction before their rational brain kicks in. The reaction might be surprise or anger, or it might be a deep sense of inadequacy. You might just think it's easier easier not to give feedback – but then the other person would be justified in saying that nobody ever told them what they needed to know.

Feedback is most effective when a person receives it as an opportunity to grow, or to leave old habits behind, rather than as a fixed verdict on their worth as a person.

Questions leaders ask themselves before offering feedback on performance include:

- Am I showing care for this person and their future when I offer feedback?
- Based on the evidence, can I offer advice and support on next steps?
- What is the language that works best with this person, so they can receive constructively what I am trying to say? How can I tap into what motivates them?

If feedback is about behaviours and relationships, is it worth asking yourself:

- What is my motivation in raising this? Is there a genuine point to be made or am I offloading my own emotions? Should I wait until I feel calmer?
- If I get an emotional response to the feedback, can I keep my own reactions under control and focus on helping the other person to hear me?
- Will my body language suggest active listening and a desire to understand?
- How do I allow them enough space to reflect – possibly with some time-outs?
- Can we agree on a shared purpose, such as team success, that is important enough for us both to start a dialogue about what needs to change?
- Am I ready to take feedback on what I could do differently?

You can't change another person. You can only create a context where they want to change something about themselves.

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