



Giving Feedback

Good Feedback Is a Two-Way Conversation

by Joe Hirsch

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Getting others to accept our feedback can prove challenging, especially when it’s critical. Worried that their feedback may lead to [hurt feelings](#) or [diminished productivity](#), managers resort to face-saving techniques like the “praise sandwich” that end up doing [more harm than good](#). The result is a tenuous feedback culture built largely upon evasion, confusion, and self-delusion.

This dynamic can change with a better message — and a bolder mindset. Based on my work with leadership teams, I’ve found that when performance conversations are powered by partnership, the landscape

shifts. Not only do managers enjoy better relationships with their teams, but their feedback may even produce greater joy, not fear.

Rather than relying on a feedback hierarchy, managers should consider a partnership model that distributes power and increases two-way conversation with their employees — leading to a more authentic and revealing feedback experience that fosters trust, flows with the rhythm of work, and sets the conditions for positive, lasting change. It’s a humbler approach to managing people that focuses on asking questions, not giving orders. I call it the difference between “window gazing” and “mirror holding.”

“Window gazing” is a process of see-and-tell. Ask two people gazing out the same window to describe what they see, and you’re likely to get a pair of perspectives that are substantively different but remain equally valid. Not so in the context of work, where the imbalance of power allows only one view — the manager’s — to prevail. This limited picture of performance is often riddled with subjectivity and bias, as managers ignore, distort, and overlook details related to an employee’s work. That view becomes muddled over time, often resembling a “forgetting curve” punctuated by a sharp initial drop, followed by a slow and steady loss. While managers fumble over the past, employees are forced to sit in judgement, stuck in a present they can’t wait to end.

That changes with “mirror holding,” which offers a dramatic shift in the tone and trajectory of feedback conversations. Instead of telling their employees what to see, managers guide them where to look. They engage employees in thoughtful conversation about their current strengths, future goals, and how to bring those elements closer in line. Rather than offer directives, managers ask probing questions that help them better understand the picture of work and entrust their employees with opportunities to shape the way forward.



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In my work with leaders at all levels, I've seen the power of a humbler approach. Mirror holding enlarges employees' perspectives while expanding their opportunities for dialogue and reflection. It relieves managers of the prescriptive and often uncomfortable rituals of feedback — a hasty run-through of recent accomplishments, followed by a much longer list of deficits. And it transforms managers into people champions who actively promote the growth and agency of their employees. If the sign of a good leader is someone who creates other leaders, then mirror holding is the mark of transformational leadership.

Making the transition from window gazing to mirror holding takes deliberate practice, but it's something every leader can do with the right amount of effort and intent. Here are a few recommendations for developing more mirror-holding in your touchpoint conversations:

Ask “hero questions”

Unlock the potential of your employees by asking “hero questions” that focus on their strengths and stories of success. These questions cut to the heart of employee experience — how individuals perceive their competencies and contributions.

Some of my favorite hero questions include:

- Tell me about a time this month you felt energized.
- What have you learned about yourself from working on this project?
- What strengths have you found most useful on this project?
- Who have you recently helped, and what difference did it make in their work and yours?

Asking employees to look back at these peak moments helps managers better understand what it took to get there — and, more importantly, what it will take to get there again.

Diagnose challenges

When employees hint to a challenge, pay attention to their cues. Is this person holding back? What does that individual's body language and tone of voice convey? This process of scanning and listening can alert managers to the unseen emotional toll of work and how it is affecting performance. Try to uncover the employee's perception of the challenge and how to address it with these prompts:

- What outcome are you trying to achieve?
- What is happening? Why do you think it's happening?
- What have you tried so far? How have you handled similar challenges in the past?
- Have you tried to resolve this challenge? What happened as a result?

Helping others recognize work challenges can provide the first measure of relief. When issues are brought into the open, both sides gain clarity and can begin working towards a shared solution.

Shape the path

If performance is a journey, then it's the manager's job to help shape a path towards commitment. Once employees suggest a way forward, managers should guide their next steps. This steers the conversation towards actionable progress, making feedback more concrete. Try closing the feedback exchange with questions like:

- How do you think you'll act on this?
- What is holding you back from achieving your goals?
- What would happen if you tried this?
- How can I help you recreate the conditions of your success?

The best feedback helps others understand their strengths and provides the encouragement and guidance to build on those strengths. Mirror holders set the conditions for positive and lasting change. Making that small adjustment in your mindset can produce a world of difference in your message — and just might help others see themselves in an entirely new way.



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