

Five Barriers to Feedback and High Capacity for Transformation



A common concern of even very successful leaders I work with is lack of sufficient confidence about giving and receiving feedback in the midst of day-to-day work.

This is not surprising because feedback is inherently uncomfortable and risky. But, providing timely, effective feedback is essential if we are after the highest team capacity for transformation. Confidence in taking this on is enhanced by working with the following five barriers.

1. Lack of a motivating, compassionate purpose for feedback.

To counter discomfort, it helps to have a motivating, compassionate purpose. For example: “Feedback is not about correcting bad behavior. Under stress, everyone will, at times, act in ways counter to norms. The purpose of feedback is to help everyone be at their best.”

2. Lack of sharing and assuring mutual understanding of different perceptions.

Relational problems usually set off the nearly automatic tendency to leap from limited data to strong but often flawed conclusions. Effective, respectful feedback depends on stepping back from such certainty. Instead of just “giving feedback,” the initial aim should be to stay open and elicit and assure mutual understanding of each person’s view even if in disagreement.

3. Lack of exchange of information specific enough to enable problem solving.

Feedback is too often given in global generalizations. Then, the chances are high for provoking defensiveness and not getting to specific information which enables problem solving. For example, a client of mine was told by a colleague: “You are a very negative person.” Resisting her impulse to react, my client asked for a specific example and was told: “When I asked you for help yesterday, you said ‘No’ and walked away.” Such “negativity” had not happened before. My client apologized and they agreed not to use quick hallway conversations to ask for help.

4. Lack of shared norms for feedback.

Shared norms promote helpful feedback. Examples are: (a) Avoid global generalizations; (b) Use “I” statements and offer feedback as perceptions, not as The Truth; (c) Give descriptions of words and behaviors from specific work situations; and (c) Seek each person’s perception.

5. Lack of sufficient leadership engagement in giving and receiving feedback.

A key objective is to develop feedback-rich team interactions. To do so, leaders must model giving and receiving feedback--especially receiving it. Do you often ask how others have experienced interactions with you? All leaders make mistakes. Do you acknowledge them?

Effective, timely feedback is not easy. It requires reformulating what feedback is all about. It requires universal respect and compassion. It requires constant practice. Working with the five barriers increases confidence and helps to embed feedback within daily leadership practice.

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps healthcare organizations enhance leadership and team impact through development "in-the-moment." This means making development as efficient as possible by focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on development, quality of work environment, and progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for nine years in primary and specialty care office practice redesign for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com