The Eight-Step Feedback Process

Imagine you're at a meeting at which no one is putting the real issues on the table. Everyone is being polite and the problems of the group aren't being resolved. In this situation, the facilitator needs to stop the action and give feedback so the participants can resolve their problems and move on. It's never easy giving direct feedback, so use the right language and follow the steps outlined below:

Step 1: Ask permission to offer feedback

Asking permission lets people tell you if this is a bad time to hear feedback, and ensures that they're ready to pay careful attention. Asking permission is a way of signalling that you intend to give feedback.

"I'm going to stop this meeting now and give you some input that I think you need to hear. Is that OK?"

Step 2: Describe specifically what you are observing

Give a clear and specific description of what you observed. Avoid generalizing, exaggerating or offering emotional accounts.

"During the interviews I held with more than half of you, the issue of some people not pulling their weight was mentioned by everyone as the most serious problem facing this team. We have been talking about team problems for two hours and yet no one has mentioned this issue."

Step 3: Tell them about the direct impacts of their actions

Describe the impact on individuals, the program or the department. Keep it very objective and don't get personal. Avoid blaming. Deal with the facts of the current situation.

"Since the issue of people not pulling their weight has not been mentioned, there's a good chance that these discussions are not going to resolve your most serious team problem."

Step 4: Give the other person(s) an opportunity to explain

Listen actively, using attentive body language and paraphrase key points.

"You're telling me that this problem isn't being discussed because it's too sensitive and people are concerned about offending each other."

Step 5: Draw out ideas from the others

Frame the whole thing as a problem to be solved. Get people to offer their ideas. Remember that people are most likely to implement their own ideas. The more they self-prescribe, the better. Support their efforts at self-correction.

"What do you think we could do to make it feel safe enough so that this issue can be discussed? What guidelines will create the comfort we need?"

Step 6: Offer specific suggestions for improvement

Make suggestions that will improve the situation. Wherever possible build on the ideas suggested by others.

"I think the guidelines you have come up with are excellent. I'd like to add a few ideas about how we can tackle this with sensitivity. Would this be OK?"

Step 7: Summarize and express your support

Demoralizing people does not set the stage for improved performance; offering encouragement and ending on an optimistic note does.

"I want to thank you for being willing to tackle this tough subject."

Step 8: Follow up

Make sure you end the feedback discussion with clear action steps. This ensures that the whole exercise doesn't need to be repeated later on.

"I'm going to stop the action in about an hour and check with you to see if we're now tackling our real problems and if the guidelines we set are working."