

A 5-Step Process for giving Critical Instructive Feedback

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If the interaction went smoothly, ... it did NOT go well

1. DENIAL (Expect it--it's a normal response to the sting of criticism)

The person will likely try to protect himself/herself (we all do). In anticipation of this, begin the conversation by pointing out that the reason you are talking with the person is because you care, you are concerned about some aspect of his/her performance and you want to help him/her.

Strategy:

- Describe the mistake/problem in clear, succinct and specific terms.
- Describe what needs to be done to correct the mistake/problem.
- Describe what will happen if the mistake/problem is corrected as well as what will happen if the mistake is NOT corrected.
- Monitor your frustration level. It will rise as the person continues to deny the mistake or problem. If you don't seem to get through, *restate 1-2-3*. If you fail to break through the denial, call a "time-out" for a brief period, or stop and schedule another meeting.

2. ANGER/UPSET (Acknowledge the feeling not the comments)

When the denial wall (i.e., excuses) comes tumbling down, the person will likely become angry or upset. These feelings are *INNER-FOCUSED but OUTER-DIRECTED*.

Strategy:

- Stay focused on the mistake or problem and do not get distracted by the lashing out comments, insults or other statements---don't "bite the bait."
- Allow the person to be angry or upset, but remind him/her the goal is to recognize and correct the mistake or problem.
- Resist the tendency to feel that you have to justify your position or your actions **repeat 1-2-3 in Step 1**.
- Watch the person's reactions. Call a "time-out" if the person becomes too upset or appears threatening. Give the person time to regain composure or cool off.
- If the person becomes unable to continue the conversation or you are feeling too frustrated, stop and set a date for a follow-up meeting. If necessary, seek a consultation from a mental health specialist to determine if the person should undergo a more formal evaluation.

NOTE: With some individuals, you may not progress through Step 1 or Step 2!

3. UNDERSTANDING (Hear it directly from the learner)

The key to correcting the mistake or resolving the problem is getting the person to "own up" and take responsibility for his/her learning, behavior and actions!

Strategy:

- Watch for verbal and nonverbal signs that the person understands the nature of the mistake/problem and the necessary corrective steps.
- Ask the person to **TELL YOU IN HIS/HER OWN WORDS** what s/he did wrong, what s/he must do to correct it, and what will happen if s/he does or does not correct the mistake or problem (i.e., "**I did X, I need to do Y to correct it, ...**").

PLEASE DO NOT ASK: “Do you know what the mistake/problem is?” or “Do you know what you have to do to correct it?”

(The person simply has to give you a head nod---which is basically meaningless!)

- Take notes as the person tells you the problem, the corrective steps and consequences. This will serve as a record of the interaction. Writing notes is also a useful technique if the interaction gets heated or if there is a major problem.

Be careful-----when the person states what s/he did wrong, s/he may revert back to Step 1 by denying the problem or minimizing its seriousness. If the person does this, **repeat 1-2-3 from Step 1** and reiterate that your goal is to **HELP** him/her correct the mistake or resolve the problem. If the person tries to negotiate different corrective steps, move into Step 4 (below).

4. BARGAINING (Know what is within your authority or control)

The goal is to correct the mistake or solve the problem, not to minimize it.

Strategy:

- Remind the person (and yourself) that your goal is to help him/her correct the mistake or solve the problem.
- Repeat the corrective action(s) described during Step 1. Some individuals will try to “negotiate” different corrective steps or consequences.
- Decide whether there is room for negotiation; what **YOU** are willing (or unwilling) to negotiate. Remember----only negotiate changes that are within your authority.
- Don’t be afraid to say, “Sorry, this is **NOT NEGOTIABLE.**”

NOTE: If you are unsure whether something is within your authority, be candid and say, “Let me check with and I will get back to you.”

5. ACCEPTANCE/AGREEMENT (Make it written or oral)

The goal is to reaffirm the person’s responsibility to correct the mistake or problem and your willingness to help.

Strategy:

- Restate the corrective steps to be taken and the consequences for achieving (or failing to achieve) them.
- Conclude by emphasizing the importance of the meeting, recognizing the effort involved to reach this final stage and providing positive, encouraging comments.

GENERAL GUIDELINE---if repeated conversations occur or the “seriousness” of the problem increases, there should be a written record of the interactions (documentation). If the problem is not corrected, develop a formal academic remediation plan that is signed by both parties.