

GUIDE

SUGGESTIONS FOR OFFERING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

People:	At least 2 people, ideally everyone in your group
Time:	1 hour
Resources:	This activity sheet, a place to meet

How can this help us?

Understanding and transforming our unhelpful tendencies in groups

It is often very difficult for us to be aware of how we might be behaving in ways that feel unhelpful within our group. This means that feedback from others can often be the most potent way for us to learn about and transform our behaviour in groups. What's more, offering and receiving feedback, when done well, can also be a powerful way to create and nurture more effective and nourishing relationships within our groups.

Creating a group culture in which people are comfortable and adept at offering and receiving feedback is therefore vital to creating healthy groups. However, because it can be very painful to admit these unhelpful tendencies to ourselves - let alone hear about them from others, we tend to avoid both offering and receiving feedback in an attempt to avoid conflict and/or causing pain to others and ourselves.

As a result we have largely lost the ability to offer and receive feedback skilfully – which means when it does happen, it often ends up being messy and counterproductive. This is why it is essential for us to take the time to learn how to do this well and co-create a group culture in which offering and receiving feedback is seen as positive because it supports us in deepening our relationships and becoming aware of and transforming our unhelpful tendencies in groups.

The guide:

Here are some suggestions for offering and receiving feedback. It can't be emphasized enough how much using these simple guidelines can transform this process. It can be really useful to hold in mind a few of these key aspects before you enter into offering feedback.

Check and state your intention:

Explain why you are giving this feedback. Constructive feedback almost always comes from a place of wanting to improve something e.g. your relationship, the group dynamic or effectiveness. Explaining this at the start will really help to open a safe space for the person to be able to hear you and hopefully minimise their defensiveness due to assuming you are trying to harm them in some way. If, on reflection you realise your intention is not yet constructive, then offering feedback is unlikely to be useful.

Cont..

GUIDE

Start with how YOU are feeling without talking about what they have done:

It is a lot easier for people to listen and hear your feedback when you talk about things from the perspective of how YOU are feeling - rather than just pointing the finger at them. As soon as people hear 'you did this' then they are likely to close down ... try and start with explaining how YOU are feeling without referring to them at all at first. This will help the other person to feel some compassion towards you without feeling defensive.

Take responsibility for your own emotions and needs in the situation:

A very common situation is that our need to offer someone feedback is driven by one or more of our own needs not being met. It will really help the person receiving feedback to hear what you are saying without becoming defensive if you explain what need it is of yours' that is not being met because of their behaviour.

It is wise therefore to spend a bit of time figuring out what is going on for you in relation to the feedback you want to offer. For example, if you are frustrated that someone is not pulling their weight and want to feed this back to them, it is useful to realise and explain that the reason you are feeling frustrated by this is, for example, because you are feeling close to burn out because of the amount of work you are doing.

By explaining this to them you are helping them to feel compassion for your situation rather than putting the emphasis on blaming them which is likely to trigger shame and therefore defensiveness.

Offer appreciation early on:

It is much easier for someone to trust that you are not trying to harm them and that your intention is benevolent if you express something positive about them or your relationship before launching into the problem. Of course only do this if it feels authentic. However if you are not feeling any authentic appreciation for the person you may want to question if now really is the right time to talk to them about the situation as it is likely that you are still 'triggered' by the situation and not fully taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage.

Taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage:

It is rare for situations to be entirely one person's 'fault'. Situations that arise between us and others, almost without exception, contain within them our own emotional baggage. To be able to offer truly constructive feedback we need to be able to take responsibility for our own 'stuff' or emotional baggage in the situation and group more generally. The more we explore our own inner world and 'emotional baggage', the more we are able to take responsibility for both our own behaviour and our reactions to other people's behaviour.

Becoming more self-aware about what tends to trigger us emotionally and what it is we bring to group dynamics is a lifelong journey and there will always be things about ourselves we are unaware of. Therefore, if you are not aware of what it is you are bringing to the situation, then it is wise to have a certain amount of humility when offering feedback and to voice that you recognise that whilst you are not aware of your role in the situation,

you are aware that these things are complicated and involve dynamics between people rather than just being about one person 'getting it wrong'.

Try and get the timing right;

Unless the situation absolutely requires it, then it is wise to wait a while before offering feedback so that you are able to reflect on some of the above issues and share from a more constructive (and less triggered) place. Being constructive does not mean not sharing your feelings, it simply means expressing them in a 'clean' way that includes taking responsibility for your own emotional baggage. The danger of waiting is that we tend to rationalise our emotions and in the process repress them. This is not the purpose of waiting. Indeed it is wise not to wait too long either as it is easy to talk ourselves out of offering feedback as it can be uncomfortable and painful for us and after a while it is easy to feel like the 'moment has passed'.

Respond constructively to defensiveness:

It is rare that someone does not become defensive when presented with challenging feedback. Feedback that challenges someone's 'sense of self' or 'ego' is most likely to trigger defensiveness in them. When this happens, without realising it, we are feeling scared and ashamed of what we are being told about ourselves – scared that this could mean we are not the person our ego tells us we need to be to be liked, accepted by or good enough for the group, for example.

When defensiveness does occur, support the person with compassion and empathy. Firstly recognise that defensiveness comes from parts of the person that are vulnerable and fragile - anger is almost always a strategy to protect a more vulnerable part of yourself. Try to imagine how you might feel in their situation and what might be useful to support you to hear what is being said without being defensive. Perhaps even voice this process ... explaining that it is not your intention to cause them pain or harm and that you feel a bit lost as to how to say what you are feeling in a way that they can hear it. Being honest about how you feel about their defensiveness, can be really helpful.

Receiving feedback:

Listen; seize the gift

A common tendency when faced with challenging feedback is to close down and try and push the other person away by being defensive. Because it may have taken quite a lot of courage for the person giving feedback to approach you, becoming defensive does indeed often serve to close them down, however, you will have missed the opportunity to learn and grow and to deepen your relationship with this person.

Indeed, feedback of any sort is always useful, no matter how challenging it may feel. It is very rare for there to be absolutely nothing useful in what the person is telling you. Feedback is a gift in that it is a rich opportunity to learn about yourself in groups and to transform your tendencies and become more effective and useful.

Sadly it is rare that feedback is delivered in a way that it is easy to hear, even with the best

GUIDE

of intentions. We therefore need to be patient and make a choice that we want to learn from this situation – no matter how challenging.

Often feedback contains a myriad of dynamics and emotions and so it can be hard to discern between what is actually the other person's own 'emotional baggage' and which bits really do relate to your own unhelpful behaviour. Again, listen carefully and trust that there is always something to learn from the situation – even if it is simply observing your reaction to what they have to say.

Try and stay aware of this tendency to become defensive and/or close down and instead make the choice to take this opportunity to learn and grow and listen fully to what is being said. Often when we are really listening, rather than being defensive, we discover that what they are saying is extremely rich and complex and not nearly as hurtful as it could seem if we are lost in our emotional reaction.

Take responsibility for emotions arising:

If you feel emotions arising within you then voice this in a way that takes responsibility for them (rather than blaming the other person for them). For example, if you start to feel fear in your body, rather than retreating in your fear, simply say to the person you are feeling some fear. This can help to keep the situation authentic and support the other person to empathise with how you are feeling.

Ask for space to reflect:

If the situation feels too challenging in the moment or you find yourself really not agreeing with what they are saying, then it is perfectly okay to explain you need some time to reflect on what they have said.

Be sure that you do come back to them afterwards and share whatever reflections you have had – again, seeing this as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Express gratitude, if authentic:

It can be really helpful to express gratitude to the person giving you feedback in recognition of their good intention and the courage it may have taken for them to speak out. Expressing gratitude sends a strong message to the person offering feedback that you are listening and gives them some reassurance that you are intending to act on their feedback.

Of course, in more heated situations it may not feel authentic to thank the person ... stay authentic but stay grounded and remain aware of what emotional baggage you may be projecting onto the other person. Don't fake 'niceness' but be aware of how painful it can be to be on the receiving end of aggressive behavior. There is nothing wrong with anger, but very often because we live in a world that tells us it is wrong to be angry, we tend to have a lot of repressed anger that often bursts or leaks out in situations like this.

Inviting a 'witness' and/or support:

Because offering and receiving feedback can feel quite challenging and emotionally

GUIDE

charged, it can be really useful to include a third person who acts as a witness, simply to be there to witness the interaction. Ideally they will be as uninvolved and neutral in the dynamic presenting as possible. It might be that you want to invite this third person to play a more active support role, in which they gently help you follow the guidelines offered here, as you are learning how to get better at offering and receiving feedback.

Needless to say our emotions and relationships are highly complex and these guidelines are simply an offering to help start the process of creating a healthy culture of offering and receiving feedback in our groups.

Whether offering or receiving feedback, try to remember that people – including yourself – are generally doing their best in a pretty messy world.

More support:

For more support on developing healthy groups go here:

<http://transitionnetwork.org/do-transition/starting-transition/7-essential-ingredients/healthy-groups/>

Check out the 7 essential ingredients of Transition here:

<http://transitionnetwork.org/do-transition/starting-transition/7-essential-ingredients/>

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