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Introduce The Elephants In The Room: A Guide To The Art Of Giving Feedback

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Feedback may be a gift, but if that's true, why are so many managers reluctant to give it, and why are so many people fearful of hearing it? The disconnect can be puzzling, given how much feedback we get, and even seek out, in other aspects of our lives. We grow up hearing feedback from teachers, professors, sports coaches and dance instructors. And as we pursue interests as adults, we often hire people who will teach us and give us constructive criticism to help us learn and improve.

But in the workplace? Not so much. There are many reasons. Bosses may not want to give feedback, because they either think it's not their job, or they don't want to do the work to really think through detailed feedback, so they default to something generic like, "You're doing great." Or they are conflict avoidant, and too worried about how a direct report is going to react to criticism, so they figure it's just not worth it to go there.

Another reason is that bosses may be reluctant to share positive feedback because they're worried that it may create unreasonable expectations of promotions and bonuses to come – "But you said last month that you thought I was doing a great job!" And employees may grumble that they don't get a lot of feedback, but they often don't seek

it out, figuring that no news is good news, or at least it's not bad news. As a result, conversations are avoided and problems are swept under the rug.

This isn't true for everyone, of course. Some companies have deep commitments to training all employees on how to give and get feedback. But such cultures are still more the exception than the rule. As a result, workplaces are overrun by the metaphorical elephants in the room that nobody wants to talk about.

My colleague **Kathy Murphy** and I have gathered the best tips and advice from many of our colleagues at Merryck & Co., where we mentor senior executives. I've also dug into the archives of my more than 600 interviews with CEOs and other senior leaders to find their best nuggets of advice.

So if you're at all uncomfortable with giving or getting feedback — and let's face it, most of us are uneasy about those tough conversations — here's a quick rundown of smart tips for giving feedback. Much of the advice here is for managers, but we'll also share a couple of tips at the end for employees who want more feedback than they're getting.

Tell people you're going to give them a lot of feedback

The more time that passes between feedback sessions, the more things get built up, creating a particularly charged moment when the conversation finally happens. The person across the table likely will be sitting with their arms folded over their chest, waiting defensively to

hear what you're going to say, because three or six or twelve months of performance is suddenly on the line.

Better to tell people up front that you're going to give them a lot of feedback as you work together, so that they become less sensitive to it. It's an approach that Seth Besmertnik, the CEO of Conductor, a search engine optimization technology company, has long used. "When they do something great, send them a little e-mail," he said. "When they do something you think they can do better, pull them aside, and get into that rhythm. A lot of bad patterns happen when you go for really long periods without giving people feedback, and it just bottles up. They're so used to not getting any feedback that when they get it, it's this huge deal. If you've got something on your mind, let it out. Don't let it drift."

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A puppy metaphor from Carol Bartz, the former CEO of Yahoo, provides an effective reminder to give feedback in the moment: "When the puppy pees on the carpet, you say something right then because you don't say six months later, 'Remember that day, January 12th, when you peed on the carpet?' That doesn't make any sense. 'This is what's on my mind. This is quick feedback.' And then I'm on to the next thing."

This "in the moment" approach also helps avoid getting caught up in long scripts for providing feedback, like the "criticism sandwich," with a criticism sandwiched between two compliments. Just get to the point, but be sure to mix in both positives and negatives over time. "Make sure you're praising people, and make sure that you're giving them feedback," said Angie Hicks, the chief customer officer and director at ANGI Homeservices. "Because their perception of how much feedback you're giving them is always less than what you think you're giving them." Plus, focusing on positives helps reinforce the importance of their strengths so that they improve even in more in those areas. And mix up how you give praise and tougher feedback. If you always send hero-grams in emails and have tough conversations face-to-face, then people are going to start dreading the in-person meetings.

Don't Go "Over the Net"

I first heard this expression from Andrew Thompson, a veteran tech entrepreneur who ran Proteus Digital Health, and it's a game-changer: "When you give somebody feedback, it can't be to say, 'You're doing this because you don't like me,' or whatever. It's got to be a very straightforward thing where you say, 'When you yell at me, it makes me feel like I'm not valued.' People concoct all this imaginary garbage about why the person is doing this to them when in fact the person may not even realize that they're doing anything."

The point is that when you're giving feedback, never make any statement that suggests you know *why* somebody did what they did. If you signal that you know somebody's motivations — in effect, going

over the net — that is certain to get their back up, and rightly so. Instead, only make comments about observable behavior and performance. You can talk with confidence about how their performance makes you feel, because then you're staying on your side of the net, and they can't take issue with what you're feeling, in the same that you're not questioning their feelings (only their actions).

Level the playing field (a bit)

Here's a predictable scenario. Imagine a manager sending an employee an email that says, "Can you stop by my office this afternoon?" Right out of the gate, the employee is going to be in a heightened state of anxiety until the meeting. When they walk into their boss's office, they may be so worried and in such a defensive crouch that they're unlikely to hear the feedback, let alone be open to it.

By creating a sense that they're more in control of the conversation, you're far more likely to arrive at a good outcome. And you can do that by simply asking the person, "I'd like to give you some feedback. Is now a good time to share it?" Or, "Are you open to hearing some feedback?" The person may know that saying "no" is not really an option, but it's a small show of respect that will help level the playing field for the conversation. And there may be instances when the person does ask to meet at another time because they need to decompress after, say, a challenging presentation.

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Speaking of a level playing field… One concern that people can have when they are getting feedback is whether they are being singled out for criticism and being treated particularly harshly compared to others. A smart way to disarm that concern is to use the same framework for everyone – tell them three things that they are particularly good at, and tell them three areas for improvement. They're less likely to take things personally if they know everyone is being treated equally with the same mix of positives and areas for improvement.

Make sure that your feedback has been heard

People often react to feedback differently. You could have the same conversation with two employees, and there's a good chance that they could walk away from the meeting with completely different impressions of how it went. One person may hear on the only negatives and feel a sense of crushing defeat, while the other person chooses to focus on the positives, and they walk out of the meeting thinking that they just got a glowing review. That's why you should end the meeting by asking the employee what they heard from the conversation and what their takeaways and action plans are from the meeting.

"The reality is that people don't like giving feedback," said Stephen Sadove, the former CEO of Saks. "By the way, there's a flip side to it,

which is that people don't like to necessarily hear feedback, and even when they're given feedback they oftentimes don't hear it. Sometimes you'll hit people between the eyes and then you'll see that they didn't think they got any feedback."

While we're talking about different reactions, it's worth talking for a moment about what to do if an employee gets emotional and starts crying in your office. It's an uncomfortable moment for everyone. Opinions range widely on the best response, but we suggest keeping a box of tissues handy, and then leave the room for a few moments for them to regain their composure, or ask if they want to come back later to revisit the conversation.

Don't overlook the quiet performers

It's a fact of life in organizations that often the people who are the most high-maintenance get most of the attention from managers, because they're always in their manager's office complaining about something. So the quiet high-performers and the high-potentials often get overlooked and taken for granted. If you're a manager, make sure that you're spending time with everyone. People will notice if you're not.

"I want to create a culture where the best performers don't have to work hard to let you know they are performing well," said Dan Rosensweig, the CEO of Chegg, an online learning company. "We spend a lot of time in all of the companies that I run or work in making sure we know who the star performers are, rather than forcing them to send an e-mail or come see you or brag about themselves, which they

are really uncomfortable doing. I've learned that they appreciate it because they then can focus on doing the job and not worry about whether people are noticing."

How to Ask for Feedback

What do you if you keep asking for feedback from your boss and you keep getting the brush-off or a dutiful "fine?" I've heard from many senior female executives that this can be particularly challenging for women seeking feedback from male bosses, who avoid being direct because they worry about the emotional fallout, or about appearing to be gender-biased if they deliver tough feedback.

Jillian Griffiths, the chief operating officer of Clayton Dubilier & Rice, the private-equity firm, shared a smart strategy for breaking through: "You need to create an environment to get feedback. Instead of coming out of a meeting and asking right away for the feedback, it's a good idea for the woman to say to the man, 'Hey, I'd love to get your feedback on this meeting. I'm going to book ten minutes in your diary tomorrow.'"

"One of the most valuable things I could do for somebody is tell them exactly what nobody else had told them before."

She added: "You're putting that person on record that you want that feedback, and it also gives you the time to prepare. And when you have that meeting, you specifically say, 'Hey, I know giving feedback isn't something we all love to do, but I want to learn, and the faster I learn what you think, the faster I'm going to progress.' Even to this day I might say, 'Look, I know you've said to me that you think I'm doing well. But I know that I'm not perfect and I want to get to my full potential.' It's about finding the right words to make sure the person on the other side of the table understands what you want. The point is: give me the feedback."

Another tactic for getting your manager to provide you feedback is for you to start the conversation by writing and sharing your own performance review. I learned of this tip from Kevin Sharer, the former CEO of Amgen. His advice: "Write a memo for your boss that says, in effect, 'Here's how I think I'm doing. Here's what I think I need to work on. What do you think?' That sends an important signal that you're taking responsibility for developing yourself, and the memo provides an easy starting point to have the conversation."

And that's the point — to simply have the conversation. It may feel awkward starting it, but more often than not the feedback can help clear the air. If there's a problem, usually everybody knows it, so it's better to deal with it than let it linger. If you go into the conversation with a mindset that you want them to succeed and have their best interests at heart, people are likely to appreciate the straight talk.

Karen May, the vice president for people development at Google, has

coached hundreds of executives during her career, and she has often seen the benefits of such feedback. "As a coach, I was often in the position of giving people feedback that they hadn't heard before, after interviewing a bunch of people they work with," she said. "It was always difficult for me, too. Just at a human level, it's difficult to tell somebody something that isn't working about them. But I came to find that people are incredibly grateful. If I'm not doing well and I don't know it or I don't know why or I can't put my finger on what's not working and no one will tell me, then I don't know how to fix it. And if you give me the information, the moment that the information is being transferred is painful, but then I have the opportunity to change it. I've come to realize one of the most valuable things I could do for somebody is tell them exactly what nobody else had told them before."