15 Ground Rules for Giving Feedback in Coaching

Many people are bad at giving feedback because they have another agenda. For instance, they may use feedback as a weapon of self defense to take jabs at people who have hurt them. They may use feedback to overcome their own insecurities by proving how smart and superior they are or by doling out praise to make people like them. Or, they may use feedback as a power play to show who the boss is. However, in most cases, people who are bad at giving feedback have good intentions and want to be helpful. The problem is that they don’t know why they’re giving feedback or how to do it.

Good feedback serves one purpose: to give the people receiving the feedback more perspective and to help them improve. Giving useful feedback requires many skills and attributes. First and foremost, the critic must be a person who can pay attention to details and who has finely developed observation skills. A disorganized, preoccupied person or one who isn’t very observant is not likely to give good feedback to someone else. Also, giving good feedback requires a significant commitment that many people underestimate. It takes energy, focus, and time to review and assess another’s person’s work, behaviors, thought processes, and performance. Another problem people have with giving feedback is that doing it requires considerable sensitivity, tact, and communication skills. It also requires confidence. The person giving feedback must believe that his or her observations and opinions are worthwhile and matter.

Fortunately, giving good feedback is a learned skill. Below are 15 ground rules that will help you the next time you give feedback to your coach or to others:

1. **Know the goals before you speak.** What is the feedback you’ve been asked to give? What are the goals? If you don’t know the intention of the feedback, it’s very difficult to offer useful evaluation and advice. If you don’t know, ask, “What are you trying to accomplish here?”

2. **Establish helping attitudes.** Look for ways to be supportive, direct, sensitive, considerate, descriptive, specific, and thoughtful. Check your own attitudes before you speak to be sure that you are not attacking, indirect, evasive, insensitive, disrespectful, judgmental, impulsive, or selfish.

3. **Prepare for giving feedback.** Avoid giving off-the-cuff feedback. Give careful consideration to what you will say and be ready to cite examples. Prepare notes before your coaching session when they will help you.

4. **Talk as much about what is as about what isn’t.** It is tempting to focus on problems and what’s not working rather than on what’s good and working. Make sure you spend as much time and energy focusing on the strong parts of what your coach is doing as the weaker and more questionable parts.
5. **Make a positive-negative-positive sandwich.** Find ways to alternate between giving positive and negative feedback, and when possible, start and end your feedback session with positives. This is a feedback technique that establishes trust and helps people become comfortable with hearing other people's opinions.

6. **Choose the proper time and place for giving feedback.** Offer feedback to your coach in private and keep your conversation confidential. Don’t try to give difficult feedback when a coach is not in the best position to receive what you’re saying. For example, giving feedback by email may allow for a good beginning but it does not generally offer the same level of give-and-take discussion that can be achieved face-to-face or on the telephone. Check your own mood before you give feedback to your coach, too. You’ll give more useful feedback when you are calm, focused, and unharried.

7. **When possible, offer feedback in a positive statement.** For example, if you want to offer negative feedback, look for situations in which your coach did the same thing better. Point to those times as positive models of what is most helpful to you.

8. **Be honest.** Don’t candy-coat your feedback to your coach or omit important observations. If there’s a ten ton white elephant in the coaching living room, say so.

9. **Be specific.** Avoid general comments and catch-all words such as never and always. Clarify pronouns such as it and that. Describe particular examples from your coaching sessions in rich detail.

10. **Focus on the behavior, not the person.** Be descriptive rather than evaluative. Tell your coach what you saw and heard and when. Refer to coaching behavior that can be changed. Address the coaching, the circumstances, and the results.

11. **Own the feedback.** Describe what you observed from an I perspective. For example, “I wondered when you were writing in your notebook if you were really paying attention to me.” Don’t back-peddle or waffle. Say what you have to say and stand by it.

12. **Be careful when issuing advice.** Remember that there is more than one way to coach. Respect diversity. Keep in mind that what works well for you may not work well for all coaching clients.

13. **Practice giving affirmations.** Offer sincere encouragement from the heart if you mean it. The last thing you’ll want to seem when offering feedback is patronizing. However, remember always that the coaching is about you. Your purpose in giving feedback to your coach is to enable him or her to provide the best coaching services possible for your needs.

14. **Be respectful, always.** Respect and ridicule don’t mix well. Shaping sentences and remarks to be snide or sarcastic is unlikely to be helpful to your coach and may backfire. Strive to offer feedback, commentary, and advice without attaching negative energy to it.

15. **End on a positive note.** Look for some area of agreement, strength, or hopefulness on which you and your coach can build.