

# Insight Search

*It's better than feedback.*



by Noah Blumenthal

**Y**OU ARE IN A TOUGH POSITION when you need to give feedback, and sure that the recipient won't like it. To make matters worse, the person is your boss!

You may tend to freeze up in delicate conversations. There is too much to remember, and you hate conflict. How can you deliver this feedback?

The answer to *how* lies in *who*. Who is feedback meant to serve—the deliverer or recipient? It should serve the recipient, but it seems that feedback is purely a vehicle to enable the deliverer to express pent-up frustrations. Most feedback is given in the sit-down-and-take-it style. The recipient can't get a word in edgewise. The deliverer argues her point, backs it up, defends it, overstates it, and repeats it. The recipient becomes more frustrated, angry, and defensive in this scenario. We should call this *force-feedback* as the recipient is force-fed what he doesn't want.

Other times feedback is candy-coated to the point of being unrecognizable. This may seem that it benefits the recipient by sparing feelings. In reality, this delivery is also made for the sake of deliverers—sparing them the discomfort of saying something difficult. This doesn't serve the recipient who leaves the conversation as unaware as when he arrived. We should call this *saccharine-sweet* as the recipient is left with an overly sweet and not entirely pleasant taste.

## How Best to Provide Feedback

What would feedback look like if it were designed for the recipient? In fact, there are professions dedicated to this question. They are experts in adult learning theory and instructional designers. They teach us two important lessons about how adults learn. First, *we learn when and what we want to learn*. If we are not interested in something, it doesn't matter how well it is delivered. We will not absorb, accept, or internalize it. When the recipient isn't interested, the scenario is doomed from the

start. Second, *we learn through experience*. This can be talking, asking questions, acting, visualizing or any method that makes us active. A passive recipient also will not learn.

People learn when they are interested in the lesson and when they are involved in the process. I suggest we call this recipient-centered process an *insight search*. People are interested in insights. Insights evoke curiosity and require processing to maximize understanding. For someone to receive an insight, he has to involve himself mentally in the process. This is what feedback should be—an interactive and engaging process in which the recipient seeks and attains new insights.

The insight search has five steps.

**1. Ask for permission.** If the recipient isn't interested in what you have to say, you're wasting your breath. Ask if he wants to hear what you have to say. Don't ask if he *wants feedback*. No one does. Here is the question: "May I offer you an observation?"

That's it. Don't say anything more or less. This question is non-threatening. An observation could be positive, negative, neutral, exciting, interesting, even insightful. The recipient tends to be open to this, certainly more than to the offer of feedback.

When he says, "yes" he has committed to hearing

you—he has agreed to listen and consider your observation. If he says, "no," it's better to know he isn't interested before making the observation. You can let it go or offer the observation later.

This question also primes you to focus on what you observed—what you heard or saw. It grounds you in reality and reminds you to steer clear of the explanations, justifications, and interpretations that make feedback so painful to deliver and to receive.

**2. State a single sentence observation.** Most people err in feedback on the side of over-talking. They get nervous and they ramble. This either clouds their message leaving the recipient confused or intensifies a criticism making the recipient angry and defensive. The single sentence observation is

a powerful antidote to this. It might sound something like this:

"Your presentation in the sales meeting lasted 45 minutes." Then stop. Your silence is more powerful than anything else you could say. You might want to express that he lost the customer or annoyed the partners or was oblivious to how his ramblings aggravated other people. You could offer many other observations, but at this stage they will only serve to limit your message.

The recipient needs to process your observation and determine whether or not he wants to hear more. If he doesn't, there is no value in continuing. If he does, you'll discover that by his response to the silence.

**3. Be "okay" with defensiveness.** At this point, the recipient might become defensive and tell you you're wrong—or worse. You can't win this as an argument. You can't convince this person. So don't try to defend your view of the situation. It won't help. Simply say, "Okay." That's it. Nothing else. Again, your silence will be more powerful than anything you could say. One of two things will happen. The recipient will either reiterate his defensive position, or retreat from it. If he remains defensive, walk away. If he retreats and asks you a question, you can continue.

**4. State single sentence backups.** Prepare three single sentence observations that back up your initial observation. For example, "The presentation was scheduled to last 20 minutes." "The partner spent a lot of time looking at his watch." "No one asked any questions at the end." Deliver these one at a time and allow silence after each for the recipient to respond and indicate interest in added observations and discussion.

**5. Search for insights together.** At this point, you and the recipient are ready to search for some insights. *Searching* indicates that you and the recipient are both in this together, looking to find insights that relate to the observations revealed. You aren't feeding these to the recipient—you are searching together to find these insights.

Feedback usually doesn't develop the recipient; rather, it only allows the deliverer to vent. The *insight search* shares the control and authority in the conversation and engages both parties in the learning process. So, say goodbye to feedback—doing so might open a new world of insights. **PE**

Noah Blumenthal is President, *Leading Principles*, and author, *Be the Hero, You're Addicted to You: Why It's So Hard to Change and What You Can Do About It*. Call 516-352-2744 or visit [www.leadingprinciples.com](http://www.leadingprinciples.com).

**ACTION:** Provide feedback using these tips.

