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# Teaching the Art and Craft of Giving and Receiving Feedback

Patricia L. Harms

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Deborah Britt Roebuck

*Kennesaw State University, droebuck@kennesaw.edu*

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## **INNOVATIVE ASSIGNMENT**

### **TEACHING the Art and Craft of Giving and Receiving Feedback**

**Patricia L. Harms**

**The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

**Deborah Britt Roebuck**

Kennesaw State University

In the workplace, the process of evaluating and discussing the performance of both employees and managers is referred to as feedback. The process generally involves a discussion of the individual's strengths or weaknesses, with suggestions on how to improve upon weaknesses. Feedback aligns workplace behavior with the overall goals of a team or an organization. While the ways in which work teams and organizations provide employee feedback vary greatly, most formalized systems include some sort of quantitative scale coupled with qualitative feedback. To help prepare students for providing and receiving qualitative feedback, we incorporate feedback assignments into our courses. In this article, we propose two feedback models and introduce four assignments we've successfully implemented.

As observers, we may recognize intuitively that managers and leaders should give their employees feedback, so that the employee can continue to improve in his or her role. Similarly, employees on work teams should give other people on their team ongoing feedback regarding their work. Indeed, according to Gratton (2008) of the London Business School, “one of the most crucial organizational levers in the creation of cooperative working environments and collaborative teams is managers who coach and mentor others”— by providing constant

feedback on employee performance (p. 9). Feedback encourages individuals to capitalize on their strengths and develop their weaknesses, which in turn produces high-performance teams and organizations (Gratton, 2008). Feedback is important to managers and leaders because employees' actions and behaviors ultimately determine the corporate culture and success of an organization. Feedback shapes an employee's understanding of what is acceptable behavior within an organization or workgroup.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Regardless of the perceived and recognized value of performance feedback, providing performance feedback is no easy task. According to Cleveland, Lim, and Murphy (2007), “the only task more difficult than *receiving* performance feedback is *giving* performance feedback” (p. 170). Further, it seems many employees are not adequately trained to provide feedback as found in research done by the American Management Association (AMA). The AMA found that the main cause of frustration during the (performance) evaluation process was that managers were insufficiently trained in giving feedback and did not provide quality coaching to their employees on how to perform on a higher level (Krug, 1998). Apparently, the trend of not providing adequate training has continued over the years. One nontraditional student shared his experience with one of the authors during the summer semester of 2009: “I went through one job without ever being offered suggestions for improvement in the 14 years I worked there. In that same job, I filled out my own yearly performance evaluation and it was almost cookie cutter year after year. One year I mentioned improvement needed on my report, and it stayed on the evaluation for the next two years” (Denny Meyers, personal communication, June 21, 2009).

While an up-to-date study of the training employees receive to provide feedback isn't readily available in the published literature, anecdotal evidence provided by the authors' current

and former undergraduate, MBA, and executive MBA (EMBA) students suggest that current training practices vary greatly, and often managers learn how to give feedback “on the fly.”

Business communication courses that feature learning teams provide an ideal setting for teaching students how to learn to provide and receive productive feedback in a controlled environment. Teaching students to provide performance feedback is a logical component in business communication courses (Foster, 2002) both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Business communication instructors can easily create appropriate conditions and teach students how to engage in give-and-take discussions that also involve feedback, skills that students will be able to implement in the workplace. Providing frequent and timely performance feedback is also an essential principle to effective team-based learning (Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, & Fink, 2004, p. 28).

Fredrick (2008) has pointed out that students are often “most comfortable making crucial evaluative comments about teamwork and teammates in hypothetical or anonymous situations” (p. 450). Therefore, Fredrick recommended either talking about collaborative strategies before forming teams or talking with students at the end of the project about their team experience without talking specifically about individuals. We agree that talking about collaborative strategies before forming teams is critical, but we also agree with Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, and Fink (2004) that students should *not* be encouraged to shy away from giving feedback. If students are not taught how to give direct feedback to each other about their effectiveness as a team member, we believe it is a missed opportunity for the future as well as a missed opportunity to teach students effective business communication practices. The model we will recommend provides students with a useful framework for providing (and receiving) concrete, actionable feedback with grace.

## **Models of Performance Feedback**

We looked to the literature for guidance regarding performance feedback and to hopefully find workplace feedback models we could teach our students to first use in the classroom and later in their professional lives. We hoped to find a model that was constructive, cooperative, and reciprocal, because it would reinforce and encourage the positive aspects of an employee's (in our case, a student's) performance while providing suggestions on how to improve upon weaknesses (Russell, 2001). Second, we wanted a feedback model that was clearly designed, because if feedback mechanisms are not well designed, they may not be taken seriously (Clausen, Jones, & Rich, 2008). We also wanted a model that didn't take too much time and that wasn't difficult to complete. Supervisors and employees alike cite the amount of time that is consumed by preparing feedback reports frustrating and inconvenient (Clausen, Jones, & Rich, 2008). In several studies, CEOs have cited performance management and feedback as the most irritating and ineffective component of their organizations (Gratton, 2008).

According to Asmuß (2008), feedback can be given four ways: positively, negatively, directly, and indirectly. Studies show that most negative feedback is given indirectly. Supervisors tend to soften the blow by using softer words and postponing critical statements. Furthermore, supervisors will tend to make suggestions for improving future performance rather than focusing on the insufficient performance of the past. While this approach may be easier for the supervisor, the employee may have difficulty responding directly to the feedback. The employee is too preoccupied with trying to align a response to the supervisor's criticisms while avoiding the social awkwardness that comes with giving and receiving negative information. Asmuß, therefore, concludes that the supervisor can hamper effective feedback by being too indirect.

The delivery of feedback must be consistent, which will make the feedback more credible and will aid employees by making expectations more predictable. Importantly, positive feedback should be given. If an employee does an exceptionally good job, managers should be sure to acknowledge the outstanding contribution. Otherwise, the employee may not feel valued and may be tempted to take his or her talent elsewhere. Giving praise where it is due also encourages buy-in of employees to the organization's overall goals. Indeed, Berry, Cadwell, and Fehrmann (1996) have recommended that 80 percent of all feedback that is given should be positive feedback. On the other hand, if an employee is lacking in an area, the supervisor (or team-worker) should take the time to discuss the weakness and provide concrete ways to improve performance. In terms of receiving feedback, managers should encourage employees to self-reflect before feedback is given, so that the employee will be prepared to discuss his or her performance. Self-reflection also gives time for the employee to think of ways to improve upon his or her weaknesses. The supervisor should make it clear to the subordinate how his or her talents and work contribute to overall organizational goals (Koziel, 2000).

Experts have suggested that feedback sessions should be done in person and should be done frequently enough that employees are constantly aware of exactly what is being reviewed. Even if an employee has multiple weaknesses, strengths should be praised in the beginning of the discussion, so that he or she retains a sense of self-worth and importance. Nevertheless, the most critical negative issues should be dealt with early in the conversation to emphasize their importance. Questions should be designed to encourage discussion, so that valuable information or explanations are not excluded. Individual personality traits should be left out of the discussion entirely. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that feedback is a two-way communication: no one enjoys being criticized without an opportunity to discuss the issue (Krug, 1998). While

individuals tend to deliver negative information indirectly, Asmuß (2008) has claimed that feedback can be made more effective through more direct criticisms of specific behaviors. If negative feedback is stated more directly, the employee is more likely to understand the reason for being chastised and is therefore given more responsibility for proposing ways to improve his or her behavior.

A performance appraisal assignment model suggested by Foster (2002) argues that performance feedback should be written with specific and objective language. Foster's argument supports Cleveland, Lim, and Murphy's (2007) recommendation that managers should focus on giving people more detailed, objective feedback about their performance (pg. 182). Foster (2002) further argued that "we should strive to represent this type of writing to our students in a way that reflects more accurately the way it is perceived and evaluated in the workplace" (p. 114).

According to experts who were interviewed for Foster's article, performance feedback should:

- Describe behavior, performance, and results the evaluator has observed
- Explain, illustrate, and support the evaluator's conclusions

Tell employees clearly what they are doing well and describe what they need to improve (pg. 112).

This article describes two feedback models that take these performance feedback guidelines into consideration. The models follow Foster's recommendations for providing effective performance feedback, and they can be used at the undergraduate, graduate, and executive education level to enhance the future feedback practices of co-workers, managers, and leaders. The article also emphasizes the importance of teaching feedback models in business communication courses through assignments and activities that provide students opportunities to practice giving and receiving concrete, actionable feedback.

## CLASSROOM FEEDBACK MODELS

The two feedback models we recommend are described by the acronyms “BET” and “BEAR.” The BET model is adapted from Berry, Cadwell, and Fehrmann (1996) and focuses on positive feedback (see Table 1). Using the BET strategy as a heuristic, we developed the BEAR model for giving constructive feedback. In addition, we instruct our students on how to receive feedback constructively.

<Please insert table 1 about here>

### *BET Model*

The BET model is used to provide positive feedback and includes three steps: Behavior, Effect, and Thank You. We encourage students to make approximately 75 to 80 percent of their feedback to their peers positive rather than negative.

**Behavior.** In the “behavior” segment of feedback, the individuals giving feedback describe specific, detailed observations of positive behaviors they’ve observed their peers demonstrating. We encourage the students to use concrete language and to be clear, detailed, and accurate. The issue of accuracy is particularly important when describing frequency of behavior (e.g., three times this month, two out of three meetings, sometimes). Students have a tendency to exaggerate frequency (e.g., never, always), which is easy for a listener to discount as inaccurate.

**Effect.** The “effect” segment explains how the individual’s behavior/actions is/are helpful to the team.

**Thank You.** Thanking the individual is the third part of the BET model. While this task is relatively easy to do, we often find students are initially uncomfortable thanking the other individuals on his/her team. Table 2 provides an example of feedback written in the BET model.

[Please insert table 2 about here]

***BEAR Model***

We created the BEAR model as way to provide constructive or “do better/needs improvement” feedback: Behavior, Effect, Alternative, and Result. We suggest to students that approximately 20 to 25 percent of their feedback fall into this category.

**Behavior.** In the “behavior” segment of feedback, the individuals giving feedback describe specific, detailed observations of negative or non-productive behaviors they’ve observed in their peers while following the “behavior” segment guidelines from the BET model.

**Effect.** In the “effect” segment, the individuals providing feedback describe the concrete effect of what the feedback recipient is (or isn’t) doing. We teach students to describe the impact the behavior has on the individual or the team. We make a point to share with students that often people don’t understand feedback for improvement until they understand the impact of their specific behavior on others. We encourage students to describe the feelings they experience as a result of the behavior, and we encourage them to be specific in sharing how they feel (e.g., “I feel anxious because I’m concerned we won’t finish our project). We teach them that statements that begin with “I feel that . . . or I feel like . . .” are statements of thoughts not feelings.

**Alternative.** In the “alternative” step, the individual providing the feedback recommends and describes the behavior she would like to see occurring in place of the current non-productive behavior. We teach that the givers of feedback should (1) offer suggestions for alternative behaviors, (2) indicate how their suggestions would improve the person’s and team’s performance, and (3) give the individual a specific number of times or a time frame in which he or she would like to see the individual change or modify his or her behavior. We emphasize that individuals providing feedback must clarify their expectations to get agreement and commitment for behavioral change.

**Result.** In the “result” section, we encourage students to think of other creative ways that they may persuade the individual to change negative behavior and to describe the positive outcomes that will result from him or her having made this change. The “result” section can also be used to outline the consequences regarding what may happen if the team member does not work to change his or her behavior. In follow-up sessions, this segment can be used to acknowledge peers for modifying or changing behavior. The giver of feedback affirms the change that was made and indicates how it affected both the individuals and the team in a positive way. Table 3 provides an example of feedback written according to the BEAR model.

[Please insert table 3 about here]

### ***Receiving Feedback***

In talking with students about receiving feedback, we discuss listening strategies and suggest to students that they should view feedback as a “gift” that is intended to help them to improve their performance. If individuals use feedback wisely, they will have taken another step in their professional development. Indeed, the ability to recognize how one’s actions impact others is an important aspect of developing as a leader. We emphasize that receiving feedback allows them to see things about themselves that they could not see in any other way. By having their blind spots illuminated, students will be able to correct behaviors that may inhibit their growth.

### **ASSIGNMENTS THAT FEATURE THE FEEDBACK MODELS**

Both authors teach the BET and BEAR feedback models; however, each author incorporates performance feedback differently depending on individual preference and teaching style as well as program constraints. The authors have used these approaches with undergraduate and graduate students, as well as with executive audiences. The models are flexible, and we hope

that by sharing our assignments, other faculty will see the value of implementing the BET and BEAR feedback models into their own teaching situations.

### **Assignment 1: Midpoint and Final Peer Evaluation**

The first assignment we've used that features BET and BEAR has been used by one of the authors with her undergraduate organizational communication students. The assignment features both a midpoint and final peer evaluation assignment. Before introducing the midpoint and final peer evaluation assignments, the instructor gives a lecture on giving and receiving of feedback that introduces the BET and BEAR models. During this lecture, the instructor stresses that in order to successfully manage a team's performance, each team member must be prepared to provide helpful and accurate feedback to other team members. Peer-to-peer feedback will help students grow personally and professionally. Key points addressed during the lecture include:

- Students should keep regular notes on the performance of their peers with the goal of being able to provide quality feedback that is accurate and constructive.
- The notes should include examples of actual positive and negative behaviors and the effects these behaviors have had on their team.
- The notes should be specific, detailed, and accurate.
- The quality of the students' notes will have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the feedback they are able to give.

The instructor emphasizes the giving and receiving of performance feedback is a serious and important process, and if a team member is not meeting expectations, feedback should be given immediately and frequently. Students are told to first share all feedback with team members prior to submitting it to the instructor for evaluation, so no team member will be surprised with his or her peer evaluation.

After the lecture, the instructor shares the interim peer feedback assignment that employs the BET and BEAR models. Students are instructed to provide four BETs and one BEAR for each team member. In addition, they are told to write their feedback statements to their team members and not about them (i.e., written using second-person pronouns). Also, they are coached not to use absolutes such as “always” or “never,” which are easy to discount. They are then given a form to use to complete this assignment (see Appendix A). The instructor reminds the students to share their feedback with their team members before their assignments are submitted for evaluation. Then, the instructor shares that the feedback they give to each other at the mid-point of the semester will be used for development. Final peer evaluations, however, impact students’ grades.

The final peer evaluation assignment is then discussed. In addition to providing BET and BEAR statements for team member, students must also divide \$10,000 between team members. The money cannot be divided equally. The author’s rationale for asking team members to not just take the total points and divide by the number of team members is that she wants them to think through the seriousness of the feedback process and to realize they should reward team members accordingly and not just take the easy way out. If a team has truly worked well together, team members will figure out how to reward their peers equally through open communication and problem solving. Students are informed that all feedback submitted for evaluation will be shared with team members. During the final class session, teams spend time discussing the feedback and then signing off on a form stating that they accept their peer evaluation grade. Sometimes, during these final team meetings, the peer evaluation scores do change, but if all team members have signed off on the form, team members are stating they agreed to the new scores.

After the explanation of the midpoint and final peer evaluation assignments, the students work through some practice situations and write some sample feedback using the BET and BEAR models. The sessions end with students role-playing situations to reinforce the models.

### **Assignment 2: Quality of Feedback**

The Quality of Feedback assignment has been used both in our undergraduate organizational communication classes as well as with cohort executive MBA students. In the Executive MBA program, the students are part of a cohort group for 18 months, and they receive instruction on how to give effective feedback in an Opening Residency lecture. Then, each semester the students provide feedback to their peers and receive feedback from their instructor relative to the quality of the feedback that they had given. In the beginning of the program, all feedback is written, but as students gain skill in giving feedback, they start to provide face-to-face feedback with a faculty member present to offer coaching on things that they did well and ways they could improve.

As previously described in the first assignment, undergraduate organizational communication students receive midpoint and final semester feedback from each other. Then they also receive feedback from their instructor on the quality of their feedback on their midpoint peer evaluations. A checklist (see Appendix B) that covers the qualities of effective BET and BEAR feedback is given as a rubric, and students are graded on how well they follow these models.

### **Assignment 3: EMBA Student Assignment**

BET and BEAR feedback are required in an EMBA “team effectiveness and process” course designed specifically to provide students a mandatory, formal setting for evaluating their

teammates and providing feedback designed to help them develop as leaders. The course has three iterations over the course of the 22-month-long EMBA program, during which time all students are working with a consistent small group of their classmates (5-6 students/team).

The students are introduced to the BET/BEAR models during the opening week of the EMBA program, so they're prepared to gather the type of concrete evidence they'll need to use in writing feedback for their peers. During the weeks leading up to the first evaluation (about three months into the EMBA program), the students are reminded about the BET/BEAR models through a self-paced PowerPoint slide show, and they're required to write sample feedback that's submitted to the instructor. The instructor provides feedback for the students to tweak their writing skills and their implementation of the feedback models. The students then complete an online evaluation, which includes both a quantitative evaluation tool, as well as space for qualitative feedback using the BET/BEAR models. Prior to releasing the feedback to the recipients, the instructor reviews the feedback and coaches students individually (if necessary) if the feedback isn't written in a spirit that's conducive to team growth and development. In these cases, students are encouraged to revise and resubmit their evaluations—not to change the message; rather, to present the message in a way that's likely to be palatable to the reader.

During the second and third iterations of the course (halfway through the program and at the end of the program), the students receive less instruction regarding the models; however, they're reminded of the structure and encouraged to pay close attention to issues of tone. All feedback is reviewed by the instructor prior to release to the students, because the teams must be able to continue working together and the goal of the team process and effectiveness course is to foster individual and team growth, not mutiny. A portion of the students' grades for the course is based on the quality of their feedback; other grades are based on the quantitative scores the

students receive from their teammates and on students' participation in on-line discussion forums. Because of time limitations imposed by the program, the students do not have an opportunity to deliver feedback to each other in a face-to-face setting; however, the instructor is available for coaching if students or student groups request face-to-face meetings.

#### **Assignment 4: Undergraduate student assignment**

Because of the success of the BET and BEAR feedback models in the EMBA classes, one of the authors added a feedback assignment to her undergraduate business communication course. The course syllabus didn't allow the flexibility to create a stand-alone feedback assignment, so a classroom and homework assignment was created to give the students exposure to the model and practice crafting concrete, actionable feedback.

The material was introduced in class following the final presentations of a team project. As a classroom activity, students were asked to craft BET (positive) feedback for everyone on their team. The students then shared the feedback with each other, and several students shared their feedback with the entire class. The instructor and her students critiqued the shared examples to ensure that the feedback was concrete and that the student had supported each claim with concrete evidence. As a homework assignment, students were asked to provide feedback for a team member from another setting (not the business communication class) using the BEAR model. The homework assignment was later returned with the instructor's comments, and the students could then decide if they actually wanted to deliver the constructive criticism. Although the BET/BEAR models did not directly impact the teamwork in the course, the classroom and homework assignments gave students valuable experience in crafting effective feedback. In the students' end-of-semester portfolios, several students elected to include their feedback and the

models in their saved repertoire of materials, suggesting that students found the exercise to be helpful.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, business communication teachers are well positioned to tackle teaching feedback. Essentially, the feedback models we recommend are helping the students construct an argument they can deliver either in writing or in a face-to-face setting. Anecdotally, students have shared that the BET and BEAR feedback strategies they learned were creative ways to identify areas of weakness as well as to show support and appreciation to fellow students for their other contributions. They appreciated opportunities to role-play giving and receiving feedback to become more comfortable with the process of delivering constructive criticism. Teaching these models gave a framework for students to take a potentially negative and awkward situation and transform it into a positive learning experience for all. Hopefully, the experience will help the students avoid having “feedback phobia” in the future, a significant work-place problem highlighted by Cleveland, Lim, and Murphy (2007).

Our students have reported that they appreciate having the models to guide them when giving feedback. In fact, one student shared with one of the authors that she recently adopted this approach, and she was very comfortable giving feedback to her manager. She said it made the experience for both the employee and the manager very positive, which resulted in the change the student suggested. Another EMBA student reported that she'd previously struggled with giving feedback, but that writing out feedback according to the model enabled her to successfully prepare for a difficult performance meeting at work.

Prior to implementation of the BET/BEAR models in an EMBA course, students were asked to provide both positive feedback and constructive criticism in their qualitative feedback

for their peers. The quality of the feedback varied greatly between students and some students were frustrated that they received few useful comments from their peers. After teaching the students the BET/BEAR models and requiring that they write feedback in this style, the quality of feedback has improved and more students are writing consistently high-quality feedback (i.e., feedback that is concrete and actionable).

We believe the BET and BEAR models work well for our students. As faculty, we try to help our students understand that like all new and different activities, (1) using the BET and BEAR models effectively will take time and energy to adapt, and (2) giving (and requesting) feedback will become a regular part of a normal routine if they initially work at it. In addition, we note that some students will find giving feedback easy, while others will struggle and be uncomfortable with the process. Regardless, individuals who have the tenacity to keep applying the models will be more effective as team workers, managers, and leaders.

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Patricia L. Harms is Associate Professor of Management & Corporate Communication in the Kenan-Flagler Business School at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She teaches in both the undergraduate and executive MBA programs, using a hybrid teaching model that unites the traditional face-to-face classroom with distance technology found in the workplace. Address correspondence to Dr. Patricia L. Harms, Campus Box 3490, McColl Building 4716, Chapel Hill, NC 27599; email [patricia\\_harms@unc.edu](mailto:patricia_harms@unc.edu).

Deborah Britt Roebuck is Professor of Management in the Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University. She teaches in both the undergraduate and graduate MBA programs. She teaches both face-to-face, on-line, and hybrid courses in the areas of leadership, ethics, coaching, and communication. Address correspondence to Dr. Deborah Britt Roebuck, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, MB 0404, Kennesaw, GA 30144, email [droebuck@kennesaw.edu](mailto:droebeck@kennesaw.edu)