

HOW TO GIVE FEEDBACK THAT ACTUALLY INSPIRES IMPROVEMENT

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What's it like to work without any feedback? To JetBlue chairman Joel Peterson, it's "driving a car with no speedometer, learning to cook without ever tasting your food, or playing basketball without a scoreboard."

But simply giving feedback isn't enough: If the commentary is vague and constructively uncritiquing, he says, then there won't be a path for improvement. Without specificity, the feedback will be for naught.

1) SO GET SPECIFIC.

The reason we suck at changing our habits is because we give ourselves hazy goals like "get smarter" or "eat healthier" rather than clear projects like "read one more book a month" or "eat a salad for lunch three times a week."

The more specific we are with the actions we want to see, so research has found, the easier it is to change our behavior. This goes for things we're trying to change in ourselves--and in the changes we'd like to see in others. As Peterson says:

There's no point in telling someone they need to be "more punctual" or "more diplomatic." Give examples and specific suggestions for improvement. Replace "you need to be more punctual" with "let's keep track of what time we start our weekly staff meetings in the coming month and then talk about how it went."

2) PICK OUT THE POINTS OF PROGRESS.

"Look for opportunities to praise successes even as you offer suggestions for improvement," Peterson says. "Celebrating performance has a salutary effect on everyone and is much more powerful than disciplining shortcomings."

Why? Because as Harvard Business School research director Teresa Amabile has told us, when people have a sense of progress in their day--even if it's incremental--they'll feel more empowered, more creative, and more productive.

3) BUT SOMETIMES YOU MIGHT NEED TO LIGHT A FIRE.

Part of optimizing for happiness is keeping it real. As Peterson says, sometimes you need to tell people that unless they make specific changes, they might be on their way out.

If you're in such a make-or-break situation, he says, you need to make things clear:

Let them know if something is getting in the way of their professional development, and that it could lead to dismissal if unaddressed. If this feedback is offered encouragingly--along with a plan to follow up--it can light fires that lead to improvement.

4) THEN THE CO-INVESTMENT, THEN FOLLOW UP.

So if we're going to ask somebody to change their behavior, we have to touch into our empathy and help them see their path to improvement. Then celebrate it.

"By noting improvements on the spot, you'll reinforce that you're paying attention," Peterson adds. "Check in soon about the plan you made together, and as you notice efforts to improve, point them out."

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