

# Surprising Harvard Research Says Giving Negative Feedback to Peers Won't Work (Unless You Do 1 Simple Thing)

By Scott Mautz

Harvard researchers say we've got it all wrong on giving negative feedback to peers. It's useless if you don't do this too.



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Giving negative feedback to peers can be as stressful and confounding as figuring out how to give feedback to your boss or how to give feedback to a difficult employee.

And now new research from Harvard says you might be wasting your time in doing so anyway.

The Harvard study indicates that giving or receiving peer-to-peer negative feedback rarely leads to improvement. In the study, coworkers that received negative feedback simply chose to avoid the corrective co-workers and sought to be around and strike up new relationships with more self-affirming co-workers. This is a process the researchers call "shopping for confirmation" (which sounds like the album title of a reunited boy-band).

As the study noted:

"There's an assumption that what motivates people to improve is the realization that they're not as good as they think they are. But in fact, it just makes them go find people who will not shine that light on them. It may not be having the intended effect at all."

So this is terrific news for all of us that don't exactly love doling out criticism, right? We're off the hook because what's the point, right?

Nope. There's a catch.

Peer to peer negative feedback can work--when the recipient truly feels valued by the giver.

Again as the researchers noted:

"We put employees in a position to deal with dueling motivations: I need to feel I'm valuable, and I need to improve. And we don't do a good job reconciling them with our feedback mechanisms."

The researchers also point out that in our love relationships, we don't engage in "confirmation shopping" or end the relationship in the face of negative feedback because a broader construct of affirmation and feeling valued is in place.

So how can you demonstrate to co-workers you value them so that when the time comes to help them grow through feedback, it sticks (rather than sticks them in the eye)?

Here are simple things you can start doing today:

### **1. Compliment them on who they are, what they do, or how they do it.**

And be specific within this specificity. Being precise implies you care enough to notice and to take the time/brain power to thoughtfully articulate your appreciation. When I give a compliment to a co-worker I try to make sure it's affirming, not just affectionate.

### **2. Invest in their career.**

Imagine how it would feel if all your co-workers felt truly invested in you and wanted to help you succeed in your career. Now give that energy to a co-worker.

Take the time to share balanced, thoughtful feedback (remember, corrective feedback will be more likely to work because you're showing you value them by executing this very list). Find out what's important for advancement in their career and gear your feedback towards that. And tell their boss when they're over-delivering on a criteria/attribute important for their function.

Some of the strongest cross-functional partnerships I ever built were with people that I took the time to sit down with and really understand what was important in their function for advancement, and just as important, what they truly wanted in their career. Then I was better equipped to help them in the right ways.

### **3. Make them look good.**

Give them credit (genuinely deserved) in public whenever you can--if they're cool with that. It speaks to your genuine interest in seeing them succeed, as will your tougher feedback when the time comes.

### **4. Seek out their advice, listen, and act on it.**

Some of the most satisfying moments in my career weren't always when my boss agreed and took action on something I suggested, but when a peer did. It's about relationships, not reporting lines.

So, don't give up on sharing both positive and constructive feedback. They'll value it if you value them.

Source: <https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/surprising-harvard-research-says-giving-negative-feedback-to-peers-wont-work-unless-you-do-1-simple-thing.html>