

Episode #31

HOW TO GIVE NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

with
Andrea Wojnicki

<https://talkabouttalk.com/31-negative-feedback>



Giving negative feedback is challenging and stressful. You will learn the mindsets, do's & don'ts and frameworks to help you give negative feedback effectively. Be constructive. Don't make it a surprise, don't joke around, don't threaten the person. Be empathetic (compliment in public, criticize in private), be objective and professional, and LISTEN. Make sure that the feedback is S.M.A.R.T.: specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic and timely. Avoid the poop sandwich, and try the Start-Continue-Stop framework.

SHOWNOTES

Contents

- **Key Learnings (one-pager) on “How to Give Negative Feedback”**
- **References & Links**
- **Podcast Transcript**

“How to Give Negative Feedback”

Tips for when you are preparing and delivering negative feedback:

1) **Mindset**

- We need to adopt a **constructive** mindset. Our mindset when we're planning and delivering negative feedback should be all about construction, as in **building** and **creating**.
- We want the employee to **thrive and excel**
- **Our sole intention is helping them.**

2) **Don'ts**

- Don't make it a **surprise**
- Don't **joke** around
- Don't **threaten** the person

3) **Do's**

- Be **empathetic**. For starters, ***compliment in public, criticize in private.***
- Be **objective and professional**
- **Listen**. This one is often forgotten. We must listen.

4) **Frameworks**

- The **SMART framework** - make sure that the feedback is ***specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic*** and ***timely.***
- **The feedback needs to be (and be perceived as) valid & important** Valid as in undeniably true. And Important and in important to the employee and important to the firm.
- **Avoid the poop sandwich**, also called “the feedback sandwich.” You know, the ***good, bad, good*** model.
- Try the **Start-Continue-Stop** (or traffic light) framework. You've assessed their performance and identified things that they should ***start*** doing, things that they should ***continue*** doing, and things that they should ***stop*** doing - all things that will help them advance to the next level.

References & Links

BOOKS

- “FEEDBACK (and other dirty words): Why we fear it, how to fix it” by Tamra Chandler - <https://amzn.to/2O4eHTk>
- “HBR Guide to Delivering Effective feedback” Harvard Business School Press - <https://amzn.to/307UzXX>

SOURCES

- “The Feedback Fallacy” – HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW - <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-feedback-fallacy>
- “Seven Ways to Effective Feedback” – Grant Wiggins, FEEDBACK FOR LEARNING - <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx>
- “Why the Velvet Hammer is a better way to give constructive criticism” – FAST COMPANY - <https://www.fastcompany.com/90319581/why-the-velvet-hammer-is-a-better-way-to-give-constructive-criticism>
- “The Better Way to Deal with Criticism at Work” – GLOBE & MAIL - <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/careers/management/article-the-better-way-to-deal-with-criticism-at-work/>
- “How to give negative feedback more effectively” – FORBES - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashiraprossack1/2018/08/31/how-to-give-negative-feedback-more-effectively/#4bbbeae44163>
- “Four New Ideas for Giving Feedback that get Positive Results” – FORBES - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amberjohnson-jimludema/2019/06/09/four-new-ideas-for-giving-feedback-that-gets-positive-results/#391f4520a73d>
- “Why What You Say as a Leader Doesn’t Matter” - FORBES - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/louisefron/2015/05/26/why-what-you-say-as-a-leader-does-not-matter/#132cd32f8cd4>
- “How to Use Negative Feedback to be More Successful” – FastCompany - <https://www.fastcompany.com/40443349/this-is-how-to-use-negative-feedback-to-be-more-successful>
- **Bridgewater Associates:** <https://www.bridgewater.com/>
 - Reports on its radical transparency in providing feedback:
 - <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/27/bridgewater-associates-ray-dalio-why-you-should-love-criticism.html>
 - <https://www.businessinsider.com/bridgewater-ranked-employees-by-performance-2018-3>

Talk About Talk

- Q&A episode: <https://talkabouttalk.com/29/>
 - Weekly Email Blog – <https://talkabouttalk.com/blog/#newsletter-signup>
 - Podcast – <https://talkabouttalk.com/podcast-2/>
 - Shownotes for all episodes - https://talkabouttalk.com/podcast-2/#subscribe_section
 - Andrea – Andrea@TalkAboutTalk.com
-

Podcast Transcript

Introduction

Hey there, I'm your communication coach, Dr. Andrea Wojnicki. You can call me, Andrea. Thanks for listening to [Talk About Talk](#). This is where we come to learn and talk about all things communication. Because when we communicate effectively, we can be a better manager, co-worker, parent, partner, and friend.

I want to welcome you to this episode where we focus on **providing feedback, not just any feedback, but negative or constructive feedback** as they say, this is one of the most common questions that I'm asked. It's so nice to hear that my Talk About Talk listeners are so caring. They want to learn how to provide effective feedback in a way that won't shatter their employees egos.

They aren't alone. In fact, feedback has been touted as one of the [hottest topics in business today](#). And I touched on feedback briefly in the [Q&A episode](#) I did recently, but I realized that this topic deserves more attention as in a full episode. Coincidentally, in today's Globe and Mail, there's an

article in the Report on Business entitled, [“The Better Way to Deal with Criticism at Work.”](#)

So I realized that this angst about feedback isn't just about providing it, but also about receiving feedback. At the end of this episode, you'll have some concrete advice about how to provide someone with negative or constructive feedback in a way that is **most productive, and least traumatic**. We want the feedback to result in positive change for the employee and for him or her not to feel like he or she is on the firing line.

Whenever I think about delivering negative feedback, I think about a specific experience that I had when I was maybe 28 years old. I was a brand manager and I managed maybe three or four people directly plus a cross functional team. One of my direct reports appeared to be as smart and ambitious as everyone else around, but her productivity was not up to par. So I first mentioned this informally to her behind closed doors, then I formally wrote it in one of her performance reviews, not as a main point, but as something to address. But she didn't. So then I documented it even more strongly in her next performance review. But she just didn't seem to get it. She wasn't pulling her weight. Finally, I had to put her on probation, I created a plan to explicitly define the situation and set goals for her to achieve. I remember I couldn't sleep the night before I met with her, I was so nervous. It was definitely one of the most stressful things I had to do as a manager.

Well, I've received many emails from Talk About Talk listeners describing similar situations and asking for guidance. So here you go.

1. First, I'm going to summarize for you the reading that I've done on the subject.
 - I'm going to start with **context and definition**.
 - And then I'll move to **goals and mindset** as in what your goal is, and what your mindset is, as you're planning and then delivering the feedback.
 - Then I'm going to cover some specific **do's and don'ts**.
 - And finally, I'll introduce some **frameworks** that will help you plan and deliver the feedback effectively.

- We're talking smart frameworks as in S.M.A.R.T.
- Then there's the poop sandwich, of course, yes. (*I told you I was keeping this podcast clean, didn't I? Yes, I said, poop sandwich.*)
- And then there's the helpful, red, yellow and green light framework.

2. And then at the end, I'll distill it into a checklist for you.

Sound good?

As I said, this is one of the hottest topics in business today. So I had several sources to draw from. And there was everything from [the Globe and Mail article](#) that I mentioned, self help and managerial articles in [Forbes](#), [Fast Company](#), [HBR](#) and other online resources, as well as [books](#) by management and [leadership gurus](#).

Context & Definitions

When we say **negative feedback**, we're primarily considering **managers providing feedback to their employees**. This was the context of the questions that I received from you, the listeners. But it could also apply to **teachers giving feedback to students**. And there are other contexts where it may be relevant for you. Like maybe if **your boss asks you for feedback**. It's also relevant, though, for **personal contexts**, like maybe you're in a **relationship** with someone and there's just something that they need to know. Or a **parenting** context. We certainly have lots of feedback and course correction to offer our children. Right?

Okay, so we should also define what we're talking about. You hear people calling it “**feedback**,” or “**negative feedback**,” or “**constructive feedback**.” It's also sometimes called “**constructive criticism**,” or “**corrective feedback**.” It might be easier to highlight what we're not talking about. We're not talking about complimenting someone. We are not pointing out people's strengths. That is easy. Rather, we're pointing out what someone needs to work on.

For our purposes here, we're going to call it **feedback** or **negative feedback**.

A moment ago, I described my experience as a manager when I had to provide negative feedback to one of my direct reports. I also described how it **escalated** over time, from **informal to formal**, from **undocumented to documented**, whether that was due to my ineffectiveness in delivering feedback or in her response to it. But there **certainly is a sliding scale of relative significance or gravity** with negative feedback that I wanted to point out. It could be anything from:

- **informally correcting** a new employee regarding something minor,
- to highlighting what a high potential employee could work on to **take it to the next level**,
- it could be providing an **early warning** to someone that some behavior needs to stop.
- Or it could be putting someone on **probation**.
- It could even be telling someone who is on probation, that they have **no more chances**.

Goals & Mindset

Many managers and leadership experts prefer to call it **constructive feedback** as opposed to negative feedback. The idea here is to motivate the person to internalize and act on the feedback to help them in the future. So it really should be constructive, not just negative, but constructive, as in the dictionary definition.

Yes, I did look it up. Constructive as in **related to construction or creating, building, building up**.

This is an important mindset or goal for you to have as you prepare the feedback you'll be delivering. **Your goal is to build the person up.**

Now's the perfect time for me to mention **Bridgewater**. I probably should have mentioned this earlier. Are you familiar with Bridgewater?

[Bridgewater Associates](#) is the world's largest hedge fund. Famously, they ranked - yes, ranked - their employees by performance, as in “you’re number one,” “you’re number 10.” “And you are last.”

But they also did so with what they call [radical transparency](#). Meaning, as you might guess, it was announced publicly. Can you imagine? And this strategy for providing feedback seems to be getting some traction, [at least a lot of media attention](#). Apparently, there's a similar culture of harsh feedback at Netflix. It's been reported that some employees at Bridgewater were horrified. But [the worst ranked employee, the one that was ranked last at Bridgewater, responded to the media that this experience energized him](#).

This is an aside, but I have to say it. Kudos to that bottom-ranked employee for this response. That was both brave and brilliant. I mean, he could have just quit or been fired. But instead, he turned it into an opportunity where people want to watch his progress, and he's endorsing his employer's strategy. Brilliant.

I also have to say that personally, I'm in the camp of **publicly recognizing achievements**, the positive, but **privately recognizing the negative**. That goes for parenting too, right? They say you shouldn't publicly shame your child. The same goes for work, as far as I'm concerned.

Publicly shaming employees might be aligned with the culture at Bridgewater, but generally, I think this is extreme and probably not effective. Unless in the extreme case, like Bridgewater, it aligns with the culture and therefore the type of employees that they're seeking to attract.

In a nutshell, I would say that **publicly giving negative feedback seems a bit toxic to me**.

Rather, leadership gurus advise that your mindset and the general tone is delivering the feedback should be [focused on encouraging the employee to thrive and excel](#), Got that? **Thrive and Excel**.

So ask yourself as you're planning to deliver some feedback: ***will the employee perceive that I want him or her to thrive and excel?***

Also, when it comes to mindsets, let me tell you about [Tamra Chandler, the author of "Feedback \(and other dirty words\): Why we fear it, How to fix it."](#) Handler defines feedback as “clear and specific information that sought or extended for the sole intention of helping individuals or groups to improve, grow, or advance.” I love that, let me repeat it:

Feedback is clear and specific information that sought or extended for the sole intention of helping individuals or groups improve, grow or advance.

The four key words there for me are ***sole intention of helping***.

Okay, then. So when terms of **mindsets**, let me briefly summarize:

- We are truly being **constructive**. We're focusing on building the employee up.
- We're focusing on them **thriving and excelling**.
- And most importantly, we're exclusively focused on **the sole intention of helping**

Would I highlight these things to the person that I'm delivering the feedback to? Possibly, but probably not explicitly. But when I'm planning and delivering the feedback, I need to ensure that this is my mindset.

Feedback DO's & DON'Ts

The **first question** you should ask might be one that you hadn't thought of. The question is: ***Are you the right person to be giving this feedback?***

I'm not talking about taking the easy way out and suggesting that someone else do the dirty job for you. The real question here is whether you've created a relationship of **trust** with this person. And if not, well, maybe that's on you. But it could be that you're not the correct person to be giving the feedback. In which case, you can certainly voice that. ***“Hey, I don't think I'm the right person be giving his feedback. He or she needs someone that they know, and someone that they trust.”***

As for the time that I had to put an employee on probation, well, it didn't cross my mind that I wasn't the right person to be delivering the feedback. In retrospect, I realized I definitely was the right person. But I certainly should have asked myself this question before I proceeded.

I encourage you to consider whether you're the ideal person to be delivering the negative feedback. It's a fair thing for your organization to consider. **Trust is key.** Ultimately, if the person doesn't receive trust, they won't receive the feedback.

I read a **Forbes article** on providing negative feedback that also suggest this but in a different way. In the Forbes article, it said that words don't matter. It doesn't matter whether you say here's an opportunity for you for next time, or whether you say you screwed up, fix it. **The only thing that matters is your relationship with the person and whether they trust you.**

Okay, so assuming you are the ideal person to be providing this feedback and assuming they trust you. What are the do's and don'ts?

Author Tamar Chandler suggest that we consider trust, fairness, and focus. We just covered trust. Now to **fairness**. What's not fair is when an employee hears about an issue for the first time when they're reading their formal review. This is not cool, and definitely not fair. So if you have to deliver negative feedback, **start with the informal.** Of course, it needs to be clear, but **verbal and informal is a great place to start.** Sometimes

that's all it takes. And if that doesn't work, you can escalate it to be more formal.

What else? Well, here are a few specific pointers.

- 1) **Don't make it a surprise.** This goes back to what I said about giving them some warning. Don't say, *Hey, can you come into my office? You're fired.* I mentioned this in my [Q&A episode](#). This particularly applies to more serious, more formal feedback.
- 2) **Be empathetic.** Simply ask yourself, how would you like to receive this news? You know, do you want to others **the golden rule**
- 3) **Be objective and professional.** According to a recent [HBR article called *The Feedback Fallacy*](#), the research is clear:
 - Telling people **what we think** of their performance doesn't help them thrive and excel
 - Telling them **how we think** they should improve actually hinders learning.
 - What we should be doing instead is **giving them objective instructions**. This is how they can succeed. So it's not, *here's what I think*. It's more *here is exactly what you need to do*, like an **instruction manual**.
- 4) **Be professional.** Don't joke around. You might feel nervous when you're providing negative feedback. Like I certainly was. [Nervous people often resort to jokes, and laughter](#). This isn't funny. Keep it serious, not grave, but yes, professional. So this isn't joking around. But on the other end of the spectrum, this also is not a formal threat.
- 5) **Don't threaten the person.** As in *if you don't conform to this, you're out*. Unless perhaps you're in a situation where it's a repeated offense, and the person hasn't confirmed. This is advisable for legal reasons too.
- 6) **Listen.** You may have heard that listening is what I've identified as the **number one most important communication skill** in general. It also happens to be something that managers seem to forget when they're providing feedback. I know I didn't think about that when I had to put my employee on probation. I knew that she had to understand the probation terms, of course, but I wasn't thinking beyond that. We need to prepare ourselves. So we know what to say. But we also

need to be prepared to listen, and we need to be proactive about it. So we should ask questions, and then listen. Got it?

Feedback Frameworks

One of the articles that I read said that [constructive criticism is more likely to be accepted if the criticism is timely, clear, specific, detailed, and actionable.](#) That got me thinking of a checklist for goal setting that I've heard many, many times over the years. You know: **SMART goals**, specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic, and timely, S.M.A.R.T.

It's probably no accident that this acronym used for effective goal setting would also apply to providing negative feedback. Let's run through it:

- **S be specific**, be perfectly clear, be focused about what you mean. So you're not telling the person to, quote unquote, work on your communication skills. But rather, you're saying, next time you lead a meeting or a presentation, you need to ensure that everyone the room knows why they're there and what you're delivering. As I mentioned, it shouldn't be about describing what they did wrong. Rather, it's about providing instructions on what to do next time.
- **M is making sure the goals are measurable**. Objectively measured, ideally.
- **A is action oriented**. So the person will know exactly what to do, what behaviors they need to start or stop.
- **R is realistic**. Of course, the prescription coming out of the feedback that you're delivering needs to be realistic. It's what you're asking, and in what amount of time this needs to be considered. And of course, it needs to be realistic
- **T make it timely**. Don't wait for the formal annual review. All sorts of psychology research demonstrates that timely feedback is way more effective than delayed feedback.

Alright, so we have the SMART framework. What else? Well, remember the Globe and Mail article that I mentioned? In that article, [leadership consultant, Merge Gupta-Sunderji, she talks about considering the](#)

[validity and the importance of the feedback you're receiving](#). So she was writing to help people who are receiving feedback, but we can turn this around to be for the manager who is providing the feedback.

We have an obligation to ensure that the feedback is **valid and important**, and that the employee perceives it as valid and important. This seems like a very, very simple framework. Just two things, validity and importance. But it's critical for feedback.

With **validity**, the question is, *is the feedback true?* The feedback needs to be undeniably true. Then second, is it **important** in terms of **helping the employee reach their goals?** And **is it important to the organization?** It's ultimately up to the employee to decide whether it's important to them personally. But you might want to talk to them about why this skill or behavior is important in terms of performance at the organization.

This also helps keep things objective and empathetic at the same time. You're saying, however implicitly, that ***this is what is valued and important around here. I think you've got it in you to deliver this, if you agree that this is something that you want to work on.***

Okay, we got it: validity and importance.

For the next two frameworks, I just want to point out something that has probably occurred to you, it's often considered a requirement of evaluations that there are **both positive and negative feedback** included. So if you're mentioning something bad, you better mentioned something good. And vice versa.

With that, let me start with **the poop sandwich**. You may have heard of the poop sandwich referenced as something slightly more profane. Have you heard of a poop sandwich? It's **good, bad, good**. (Also known as "[the feedback sandwich](#).”)

I gave this example of a poop sandwich in another episode. Here goes: ***Everyone around here really likes you so much. You're such a great team player. Unfortunately, we're gonna have to let you go due to your lack of productivity. But don't forget, everyone here loves you.*** That was a poop sandwich.

Here's another: ***Clearly you're super smart. But you're just not hitting the numbers that we expect. But Wow, you're ambitious.*** Again. Did you catch that? **Good, bad, good.**

This poop sandwich approach to delivering feedback has actually become a cliché, and not a good one. People expect it and they make fun of it. So try to avoid it.

Instead, I offer you another suggestion, the traffic light framework. **Start, continue, stop.** So **the green light says start, the yellow light says continue. The red light says stop.** It's that easy.

Here's what you do. You tell the person that you're using the traffic light or the start continue stop framework. And you describe how it works. You've assessed their performance and identified things that they should **start** doing, things that they should **continue** doing, and things that they should **stop** doing. All things that will help them advance to the next level.

If you consider this framework carefully, you might notice that start continue stop is the opposite of the poop sandwich. Two of the three items (start and stop) actually highlight things that need to **change**. But in a more constructive way. Beautiful, right?

It also provides us the opportunity to focus more on the **future**, when we start and continue with something than the past when we stopped doing something that we already did. And it's more about changing and a growth mindset, stopping and starting rather than staying constant with a fixed mindset continuing.

I can tell you personally, as someone who's been on the receiving end of this framework, and as someone who has delivered feedback using this framework, it is very effective. Similar to the **start continue stop** framework, the [HBR article](#) that I mentioned promotes **exploring the past, the present and the future** when you're delivering feedback. If you think about it, start continue stop also considers all three of these timeframes. Start is the future continue is the present and stop is the past.

You know, the more I think about it, the more I like this start continue stop framework. So I think I will leave you with that.

That was a lot to digest, wasn't it? Now I'm going to summarize all this learning into a simple checklist for you. **There are four parts of the checklist:**

1. Mindset

- We need to adopt a **constructive** mindset. Our mindset when we're planning and delivering negative feedback should be all about construction, as in **building** and **creating**.
- We want the employee to **thrive and excel**
- **Our sole intention is helping them.**

2. Don'ts

- Don't make it a **surprise**.
- Don't **joke** around
- Don't **threaten** the person.

3. Do's

- Be **empathetic**
- Be **objective and professional**
- **Listen**. This one is often forgotten. We must listen.

4. Frameworks

- The **SMART framework** - make sure that the feedback is **specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic** and **timely**.
- **Avoid the poop sandwich**, you know, the **good, bad, good** model.
- **Start-Continue-Stop** (or traffic light) framework.

There you go.

I created a one page cheat sheet with this checklist for you. That's in the shownotes. You're welcome.

I leave you with one last thought. Don't forget as you're planning this negative feedback that ***being on the receiving end is something else entirely***. Hopefully this advice will also serve you there to the next time someone's giving you constructive feedback. You can appreciate how difficult it is and maybe also think about their intent. Now that you have all this advice, you might be able to identify where **they** mess things up!

Just remember, it's not easy to be on either side of this conversation.

Well, that's it. I hope you learned something and that you now feel more confident about providing effective negative feedback. I thank you so much for listening. Please subscribe to the podcast if you haven't already.

Hey, Siri, subscribe me to the talk about talk podcast.

Would you like to subscribe to the Talk About Talk podcast?

Yes.

You are already subscribed to the Talk About Talk podcast.

Yeah, I knew that.

Also, [please subscribe to the free weekly Talk About Talk email blog](#). And no, I don't think Siri knows how to do that yet. So just go to the <https://TalkAboutTalk.com> website and you can easily sign up there. You can also access all of the past blogs and podcasts.

THANK YOU for listening! (and READING!)

I'd love to hear from you.

Talk About Talk™ Shownotes

- Web: <https://talkabouttalk.com/>
- Twitter: https://twitter.com/talk_about_talk
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/talkingabouttalk/>
- FB: <https://www.facebook.com/TalkingAboutTalk/>
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/talkabouttalk/>
- Email: Andrea@TalkAboutTalk.com

The TalkAboutTalk weekly email blog is your opportunity to receive **one concise email from me each week**, highlighting knowledge & strategies that will help us become more effective communicators. [SIGN UP NOW!](#):

<https://talkabouttalk.com/blog/#newsletter-signup>

TalkAboutTalk CORE BELIEF:

“When we communicate effectively,
we can be a better manager,
colleague, parent, partner and friend.”

TalkAboutTalk BRAND PROMISE:

“TalkAboutTalk is the
communication learning platform
that enriches our relationships
and enhances our career success
by providing us with
knowledge, strategies and confidence.”

***When referencing resources and products, TalkAboutTalk sometimes uses affiliate links. These links don't impose any extra cost on you, and they help support the free content provided by TalkAboutTalk.