

DAILY TED TALKS

LeeAnn Renninger: The secret to giving great feedback

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If you look at a carpenter, they have a toolbox; a dentist, they have their drills. In our era and the type of work most of us are doing, the tool we most need is actually centered around being able to give and receive feedback well. Humans have been talking about feedback for centuries. In fact, Confucius, way back in 500 BC, talked about how important it is to be able to say difficult messages well.

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But to be honest, we're still pretty bad at it. In fact, a recent Gallup survey found that only 26 percent of employees strongly agree that the feedback they get actually improves their work. Those numbers are pretty dismal.

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So what's going on? The way that most people give their feedback actually isn't brain-friendly. People fall into one of two camps. Either they're of the camp that is very indirect and soft and the brain doesn't even recognize that feedback is being given or it's just simply confused, or they fall into the other camp of being too direct, and with that, it tips the other person into the land of being defensive. There's this part of the brain called the amygdala, and it's scanning at all times to figure out whether the message has a social threat attached to it. With that, we'll move forward to defensiveness, we'll move backwards in retreat, and what happens is the feedback giver then starts to disregulate as well. They add more ums and ahs and justifications, and the whole thing gets wonky really fast.

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It doesn't have to be this way. I and my team have spent many years going into different companies and asking who here is a great feedback giver. Anybody who's named again and again, we actually bring into our labs to see what they're doing differently. And what we find is that there's a four-part formula that you can use to say any difficult message well.

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OK, are you ready for it? Here we go. The first part of the formula is what we call the micro-yes. Great feedback givers begin their feedback by asking a question that is short but important. It lets the brain know that feedback is actually coming. It would be something, for example, like, "Do you have five minutes to talk about how that last conversation went" or "I have some ideas for how we can improve things. Can I share them with you?" This micro-yes question does two things for you. First of all, it's going to be a pacing tool. It lets the other person know that feedback is about to be given. And the second thing it does is it creates a moment of buy-in. I can say yes or no to that yes or no question.

And with that, I get a feeling of autonomy. The second part of the feedback formula is going to be giving your data point. Here, you should name specifically what you saw or heard, and cut out any words that aren't objective. There's a concept we call blur words. A blur word is something that can mean different things to different people. Blur words are not specific. So for example, if I say "You shouldn't be so defensive" or "You could be more proactive." What we see great feedback givers doing differently is they'll convert their blur words into actual data points. So for example, instead of saying, "You aren't reliable," we would say, "You said you'd get that email to me by 11, and I still don't have it yet." Specificity is also important when it comes to positive feedback, and the reason for that is that we want to be able to specify exactly what we want the other person to increase or diminish. And if we stick with blur words, they actually won't have any clue particularly what to do going forward to keep repeating that behavior.

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The third part of the feedback formula is the impact statement. Here, you name exactly how that data point impacted you. So, for example, I might say, "Because I didn't get the message, I was blocked on my work and couldn't move forward" or "I really liked how you added those stories, because it helped me grasp the concepts faster." It gives you a sense of purpose and meaning and logic between the points, which is something the brain really craves.

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The fourth part of the feedback formula is a question. Great feedback givers wrap their feedback message with a question. They'll ask something like, "Well, how do you see it?" Or "This is what I'm thinking we should do, but what are your thoughts on it?" What it does is it creates commitment rather than just compliance. It makes the conversation no longer be a monologue, but rather becomes a joint problem-solving situation.

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But there's one last thing. Great feedback givers not only can say messages well, but also, they ask for feedback regularly. In fact, our research on perceived leadership shows that you shouldn't wait for feedback to be given to you -- what we call push feedback -- but rather, you should actively ask for feedback, what we call pulling feedback. Pulling feedback establishes you as a continual learner and puts the power in your hands. The most challenging situations are actually the ones that call for the most skillful feedback. But it doesn't have to be hard.

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Now that you know this four-part formula, you can mix and match it to make it work for any difficult conversation.

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