

If You Say It, Will They Listen? Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback in the learning environment helps bring about performance improvement back on the job. If a learner can clearly understand what is and is not working during the application of the new concepts or skills during the training program, then the likelihood of success back on the job is that much greater.

But giving feedback effectively is not always easy because learners may have difficulty accepting it. The effectiveness of the feedback is determined by: 1) the instructor's intent, 2) the way the feedback is presented, and 3) the content of the feedback.

When you give the learners feedback, the intent must be to improve their performance. In other words, when there is a discrepancy between the performance standard(s) and a learner's performance, it is up to the instructor to help the learner close the gap.

It is essential that feedback be carefully delivered since poorly delivered feedback can lead to defensiveness, resentment, and loss of motivation—it rarely leads to learning. Learners may respond as if negative judgments are being made about them personally. Although this may not be the intent of the instructor providing the feedback, critical words or comments often have that effect.

The instructor's *intent* and the way the feedback is presented can determine whether the learner will be *willing to change*.

The *content* of the feedback can determine whether or not the learner *can change*.

For the instructor's feedback to have the intended effect, it needs to be constructive. Constructive feedback provides useful information and creates a desire to improve—as it impacts both the “can” and the “want to” factors of performance. The feedback content must be specific, that is, it must specify:

- what was done well;
- what could be improved; and
- how improved performance could be achieved.

One way to ensure that your feedback is constructive is to use an itemized response. After observing a learner's performance during the Application component of the Systematic Learning Process, you list the merits of the performance as well as any concerns you may have. By specifying merits first, you demonstrate to the learner that

you have truly listened to what was said and observed what was done. Beginning this way makes it easier for the learner to hear and accept your concerns later.

For **Merits**, you might say:

- “What I like about your plan is...”
- “The strengths about what you did are...”
- “I particularly liked...”
- “The things you should keep on doing are....”

For **Concerns**, you might try:

- “What concerns me is...”
- “These are the things that could still be improved...”
- “The areas where you could make improvements are...”

As training and learning professionals, it is our intent to help *improve* learner performance. Therefore you must go on to suggest ways to build on the merits and eliminate the concerns. You do this by inviting and/or making suggestions.

For **Suggestions**, you might ask or say:

- “Can you think of something you could try next time that might work better?”
- “Let’s see if we can overcome the problem of..... by...”
- “Have you thought about trying...?”
- “Something that I have found to be very effective in this situation is...”

Before ending the feedback session make sure that the learner has understood the suggestions for improvement and has an action plan for implementing the suggestions.

Your Constructive Feedback consists of three elements:

1. Give an itemized response:

- Specify merits
- Specify your concerns

2. Identify ways to retain merits, and eliminate concerns:

- Invite/make suggestions
- Give/invite reactions

3. Summarize suggestions/steps agreed to.