

# Giving Feedback

From **The Art of Coaching** by Elena Aguilar

## **GIVING FEEDBACK**

Feedback is very tricky. We all need it, many of us know we need it and say we want it. But it's also very hard for a coach to effectively deliver feedback, and it's often very hard for us to hear feedback.

Part of the reason that feedback is so tricky is that the big picture in education right now is a cruel, unforgiving, and frightening place. Teachers have been blamed for far more than their share of the failure of schools; in general, those who work in schools are suspect until they show the test scores. Appreciation for educators is token and infrequent. We are all very sensitive when it comes to feedback on our work, particularly if it comes from people who haven't been in our shoes.

And yet, effective feedback can propel a person forward towards reaching his goals. In the world of sports, we see how coaches provide players with precise, on-the-spot feedback that can immediately improve their performance. Likewise, there are certain actions that a teacher can take that can immediately result in a change in what happens in the classroom; as a coach, we might see these possibilities jumping out at us and yet be unsure of how to communicate our observations in a way that the client will hear us. Delivering feedback is an art that takes coaches many years of practice.

The following are suggestions for giving feedback:

**1. Assess for trust:** First, don't give direct feedback until you are certain that your client trusts you. You also need to have a deep understanding of who your client is and how he might receive feedback. Some people respond well to direct feedback and appreciate it; others may feel defensive and may shut down.

**2. Always ask for permission.** This could sound like, "Can I share a couple things I

observed that might help you address those issues you're raising?" Or "Would it be okay if I gave you some feedback on the interaction you just had with that student? My intention is to help you feel more empowered." Always declare that your intention in giving feedback is coming from a place of caring and concern, and a desire to help the client move towards her goals.

**3. Ground feedback in observational data.** It can sound like:

"I noticed that when Michael walked in the room, you said, 'Take that hat off. I don't want to tell you this every day.' Then your next interaction with him was when he asked to sharpen his pencil. You said 'You need to come prepared.' The next time you addressed him, you said, 'Michael, what's the correct verb form here? Are you paying attention?' Then he exploded and said, 'You're always picking on me!' At that point, you sent him to the office for being defiant. Can you see his perspective, given these were the only interactions you had with him in 10 minutes? What might you do differently?"

**4. Keep critical feedback to one or two key points.** It's common to observe a teacher, for example, and note a long list of instructional or management practices that could be improved. We might have noted that the classroom was a mess, there was no system for students to turn in homework, there was no agenda or objective on the board, the teacher's verbal directions were confusing, the teacher gave students far too much time during the opening activity, students were off-task and messing around, the opening activity wasn't connected to a learning objective and seemed to be a time-filler, and so on. The first step is to look at the data we collected and determine which pieces are connected to the school or client's goals. For example, this teacher might be working on her organizational skills, therefore, those are the areas we will address when giving feedback.

It always helps if the coach has some time between the observation and the debrief to be able to digest the observation and think through the debrief.

**5. Find the Phrasing.** The language that you use with clients differs with each one based on what you know about how they will hear your feedback. Before a debrief, I think through and sometimes write out or role play what I'll say. There are clients who

respond well if I say something like, "You have got to clean up your room and post an agenda every day. You said you wanted to do that weeks ago and I still don't see it." Others need to hear something like, "A few weeks ago you talked about wanting to clean up your room. You've said several times that your disorganization gets in the way of being able to be the teacher you envision. I noticed that along the back wall there were a dozen stacks of papers, books, and files. What do you think could be getting in the way of addressing this goal area?"

In order to give effective feedback we must know how others will hear us.

**6. Invite reflection:** After we've shared one or two pieces of feedback with a client, we invite reflection on how the feedback was received and plan for next steps. We listen carefully to how someone responds to our feedback, noticing if the client becomes defensive, embarrassed, curious, relieved--there are a whole range of emotions that people can experience. It's our job as a coach to notice them and address them if necessary--if it feels like the client can't proceed to the next steps without processing them.

Once it seems like the client can move on to the "what's next?" phase, we can support him in determining how he'd like to act on the feedback. For example, perhaps a coach observed a teacher trying to use small group structures and perhaps the students didn't engage with each other in the way the teacher had hoped. The coach has just shared that she noticed that out of 5 groups, only one followed the directions the teacher gave. The teacher might feel frustrated and disappointed. The coach might ask the teacher what she'd like to try next and what kind of support she'd like from the coach, or the coach can offer ideas. What's essential is that there are next steps. Especially when the feedback is critical, the client must finish the conversation feeling that she will be supported in some way to develop those skills and capacities that aren't where she wants them to be yet.