

Delivering Esteem-Shattering Feedback

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What do you do when you observe a colleague behaving in ways that create problems for others? You realize the intentions may be honorable, but the actions are having negative effects. Others may have confided in you because they don't have the confidence to deliver confrontive information themselves.

You appreciate how important feedback is to growing leaders. You very much want to get the message across to your teammate, who may also be a friend. Yet you know the news is not going to sit well. Maybe you've even tried to communicate some or part of your message, but you weren't successful.

We humans tend to justify and rationalize when we receive unattractive feedback. We tend to defend ourselves when confronted with a perspective that challenges our self-esteem. (Oh, yes, we do like to look and feel good!) Sharing or receiving unattractive feedback causes both parties some uneasiness.

If your colleague becomes angry, the confrontation could damage your relationship. Still, you think the effort is worthwhile. How do you share your concerns such that your comments are taken seriously?

First, challenge your genuine motivations. Who will benefit from you delivering your message? Yes, there likely will be some short-term pain for your colleague and maybe even for you. What will be the longer-term effect on your organization if you are successful? Make sure that you don't have any underlying selfishness--that you are not trying to glorify yourself by sharing what you know.

Next, examine your information. Have you witnessed this behavior yourself? Is the problem you've observed limiting the effectiveness of the person? If your evidence is weak, confirm your information.

If you still think it's appropriate to offer your information, watch for an opportune time. Never deliver disturbing feedback during an emotional incident. You may be tempted to say something like, "Look, what you're doing now is a great example of the very thing that I've been meaning to tell you!"

I promise that in the heat of the situation, the person will not be receptive. On the contrary, your words will merely fuel the fire, and the person will resist considering your content and probably be angry with you! You may have only one shot at delivering this helpful information. Choose an appropriate situation.

If the information is as important as you claim, it can stand on its own. Select an opportunity when you expect no extreme emotions. A routine planned meeting is often an appropriate time.

Ask permission to share your observations. Why? First, it's a courtesy. Second, it may take a few moments for the person to realize this conversation is different from the everyday problem-solving and planning that you routinely do together. Catching the person by surprise is likely to cause an increase in defensiveness (and maybe even cause the person to stop listening completely).

Phrase your observation in terms of how people are affected by the behaviors. You can do this best by describing how you and others **feel** when your colleague behaves as he or she does.

It may be tempting to suggest what your colleague/friend should do instead. Wait to offer options until you are invited to do so. If you share alternatives prematurely, before the individual is ready to receive and consider them, you will simply make it easier for your feedback to be rejected.

If your effort seems to be accepted by the person, offer your sincere compassion for the angst he or she may be feeling. Realize that no one enjoys receiving the kind of information you just delivered!

If your effort to communicate this important information fails the first time, be persistent. It's probably not easy for your teammate to hear the news you are sharing. Obtain a second person, someone your colleague also respects, who has observed the damaging effects of his or her behaviors. It's much harder for anyone to deny two individuals he or she respects who are delivering the same observations.

Feedback is valuable! In the healthiest of organizations, individuals volunteer and seek feedback routinely. It's tempting (and seems so easy) to pass up the opportunity to provide feedback, especially when you know it won't be accepted graciously. It's worth planning and practicing your delivery. Your colleague will thank you later for taking the risk, and your organization will likely be better for it!