

GIVING FEEDBACK

How to Give Feedback to Someone Who Gets Crazy Defensive

by Holly Weeks

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How do you handle giving unfavorable feedback to someone who will surely take it badly - and I mean *really* badly? Think: shouting, tears, defensiveness, accusations, personal attacks, revising history, twisting words – pick your nightmare.

Consider the case of Melissa, who was the team leader on a recently concluded project that had not been a stellar experience for anyone involved. For most of the team, the project was a disappointment from the start: team members were assigned, not self-selected; it was known not to be a high profile project; and the deliverables were really important only for Melissa's mentor's research. Melissa's role was not a powerful one. She was first-among-equals and the liaison to management, but had more responsibility than actual authority. The carrot that management held out to members of the team was that this was a steppingstone project: if the results were satisfactory, they could anticipate higher profile projects going forward.

James, a team member in a different location, handled the situation by making the project a lower priority than his other work. His assigned contributions were often late or missing altogether, but he knew Melissa would pick up the slack because it was in her mentor's interest for someone to do so. He considered this a pragmatic solution – he had a lot of work to do. His miscalculation, however, was to assume that the team's work would be seen only as a whole, which may have been a bit naïve, as well as self-justifying. Instead, when the project ended, Melissa herself was asked to recommend individuals from the team for a new, more important project. James would not be one of them, and Melissa had scheduled a feedback session with him to let him know.

Melissa knew the conversation would not go well. James was someone who was known to shout at people, distort their words, accuse them of victimizing him, and more. Melissa's own temperament was very unlike his, and the thought of giving James negative feedback was a nightmare.

How should Melissa handle the situation?

When we fear someone’s reaction, most of us look for techniques to make the other person act differently. But when receiving disagreeable feedback, people generally repeat tactics that they’ve had success with in the past – that’s why they use them. Upon hearing the negative feedback, it’s likely that James will be surprised and angry. He’s likely to believe that Melissa misrepresented the project and is scapegoating him, taking from him the only benefit of four months’ work. In James’ view, how he responds makes sense: Melissa is not reliable, not his boss, and intends to hurt him. Why would he act differently? He wants her to back off.

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Giving and Receiving Feedback

Make delivery–and implementation–more productive.

Melissa foresees that scenario, but her temperament makes her vulnerable to what business theorist Chris Argyris calls “defensive strategies” – ambiguous, counterproductive behavior chosen to avoid interpersonal discomfort. (Examples of this might be Melissa deferring to

James, apologizing and agreeing that he is being misused, while stressing that she is just the messenger. Or, she might email the message, letting him simmer unaddressed. Or she could ask someone else to tell him. Any of these would protect Melissa from immediate discomfort, but they also signal weak competence.)

Defensive strategies become “skilled incompetence,” Argyris says. We get really good at avoiding the difficult bits, but cannot reach good outcomes and never really accomplish our goals. That can’t be recommended as a feedback approach, even if it seems better than butting heads.

Yet if Melissa does try to toughen up and match James’ confrontational style, even though she knows firsthand that it is not well-received, it’s sure to backfire. Emotions will rise, and the conversation will degenerate on both sides, destroying the relationship, and potentially both of their reputations.

Melissa needs to try a different approach. One tactic is to focus on immunizing herself against her own vulnerability to James' difficult behavior. This is like a scientist who, when studying how a pathogen compromises a cell, focuses on the cell, not the bug.

How would Melissa self-immunize against James' outbursts? By recognizing that *she* has to react to the tactic for it to work. Instead of reacting, she can neutralize how she responds, without giving in or giving up what she has to say. To get there, she can use a blueprint that pulls together three attributes of speaking well in tough moments: clear content, neutral tone, and temperate phrasing. (These are opposites to both skilled incompetence and confrontation.)

Clear content: Let your words do your work for you. Say what you mean. Imagine that you are a newscaster and that it's important that people understand the information. If your counterpart distorts what you say, repeat it just as you said it the first time.

Neutral tone: Tone is the non-verbal part of the message you're delivering. It's the inflection in your voice, your facial expressions, and your conscious and unconscious body language. These carry emotional weight in a difficult conversation. It's hard to use a neutral tone when your emotions are running high. That's why you need to practice it ahead of time, so you're used to hearing it. Think of the classic neutrality of NASA communications in tough situations: "Houston, we have a problem."

Temperate phrasing: There are lots of different ways to say what you have to say. Some are temperate; some baldly provoke your counterpart with loaded language. If your counterpart dismisses, resists, or throws back your words, he's not likely to hold onto your content – so choose your words carefully.

Clear content, neutral tone, and temperate phrasing are a package deal. Melissa won't get good results if she uses temperate phrasing, but mixes her message with a lot of contradictory body language. Nor will it work well if she thinks her content is too blunt, so she softens it. Being blunt is a characteristic of intemperate phrasing, not of content. So softening the content to fix a problem of phrasing won't get her where she wants to go.

If Melissa says to James, "In February, March, and April, the team didn't get the deliverables you committed to on the dates you agreed to," her content is clear and her phrasing is temperate. We have to imagine that her tone is neutral, but Melissa can do it. If she says, "With those omissions, I can't stand behind a recommendation for you," she is clear and temperate again. We do understand that the news is not good and James is still likely to dip into his arsenal of difficult tactics. But Melissa is on solid ground, neither altering her message nor responding to his tactics. With this blueprint in place, repetition can be a good friend: if James challenges her or distorts her message, Melissa can repeat what she has said, rather than following James down a rabbit hole. When it's time to end the meeting, she can say something simple such as: "Thank you for meeting with me. [Short pause.] I wish this had worked out differently."

Will James be happy with this conversation? I think not. Nobody likes unfavorable feedback. But remember, when delivering negative feedback to someone who's likely to get defensive, it's not your job to make the other person feel better. It's your job to deliver the information in a clear, neutral, and temperate way – by sticking to the facts, and to the blueprint.
