Self-awareness through peer review and feedback

CARE ST retreat Geneva 23-27 February, 2009

Overview

Facilitation is an art. Facilitators act as a catalyst for the social process that that generates knowledge. Competent practice of the art of facilitation requires continuous learning and emotional intelligence. The constructive feedback that can emerge from peer review is a simple way of contributing to self-awareness that leads to learning and emotional intelligence. Constructive feedback is a gift. It is difficult to learn about the impact of our behavior on others. This handout offers some insights into how to create a safe environment for constructive feedback.

❨ What is constructive feedback ❩

Constructive feedback is the process of giving and receiving comments, based on observation, about a person's performance. It should occur as soon as possible after the event and, more importantly, it should be solicited. It implies an agreement between the giver and the receiver and an understanding that the receiver has control over the feedback and will make decisions about future performance based on it. Constructive feedback is essential to learning, both because it is immediate and, when done in a group, represents a range of views.

The crux of constructive feedback is an expression from others of how the individual appears to them, which leads to heightened self-awareness. The learner can take the views of others and decide what to do as a result of the feedback, thus entering a loop of continued improvement.

In 1984 Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham outlined a theory of how we perceive ourselves, using the so-called "Johari window" as an illustration (see below). Constructive feedback aims to reveal that part of our behaviour that is unknown to ourselves, through the honest expression of other people's perceptions. In this sense, constructive feedback can lead us to understand how we seem to act from a fresh perspective, and can lead to a deeper understanding of how to improve specific skills.

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	Open	Blind
Not known to others	Hidden	Unknown

How to create safe environments where constructive feedback can occur

The first golden rule is agreement amongst everyone that feedback is desired. In one-to-one situations, it is simply a matter of asking for feedback. The environment needs to be relaxed, friendly and, above all, safe. This will break down inhibitions and enable people to value one another more.

The second golden rule applies to managing the power balance between the giver and receiver of feedback. Give control to the receiver, by asking them to be specific about the feedback they would like to receive. Ask them to specify areas or issues on which they would like clarification and ensure that the giver does not go beyond this framework.

Thirdly, maintain an environment that is conducive to effective communication. Think of it as a conversation. The giver of the feedback should maintain eye contact, constantly engage the receiver, ask them what they think, and consider how the receiver is reacting to what he or she is hearing.

In more formal group settings, a structured method will help generate comfort and clear expectations. What follows is a suggested method for peer reviewing and learning from a facilitation exercise.

1. Ask the person being reviewed to self-evaluate. Give them all the time they need to do this.
2. Ask the person being reviewed if they would like feedback. If they don't want feedback, that is ok. If they do want feedback, proceed to step 3
3. Ask the person being reviewed to list specific things for which they would like feedback
4. Take turns going around the group, inviting people who feel able to share their perceptions. Each person should adhere to the principles listed below
5. Once everyone has finished, invite the person being reviewed to react to the feedback
6. Thank everyone involved and invite congratulations to the person being reviewed for their courage

Techniques for giving feedback

'Own' the language. You are not necessarily right. Feedback should reflect the attitude that what you are saying is only an opinion, and not necessarily correct. If language such as 'I think that...' or 'It seemed to me that...' is used, then it reinforces this attitude, and makes it easier for the receiver to listen.

Be specific. It is not enough just to say 'I thought it was good' or 'I thought it was bad'. The receiver needs to appreciate specifically what he or she is doing right or wrong.

Don't overload. Most people are able to genuinely assimilate no more than two pieces of negative feedback at a time, so choose issues that you consider to be the most important and don't mention the rest. There will normally be another opportunity later to deal with additional points.

'Sandwich' the negative between positives. Begin with a positive point about the performance, then a negative and finally end with a positive. For example, 'I particularly liked the way you introduced the session...However, I felt because your instructions were quite complex it would have been better to write them on a flipchart as well as give them to the group... I found that you used your voice well when you were trying to get the group's attention when the exercise finished.'

Avoid platitudes. Positive feedback is useful both because it builds confidence and because it is a genuine learning point, or a reaffirmation of what someone does well. The fact that positive feedback is about learning, in the same way as negative feedback, is a point that should be stressed. Giving positive feedback should follow the same criteria as giving negative feedback: it should be specific, relate to behaviour, be prioritised, and be 'owned'. It is important that trainers appreciate that positive feedback is not the same thing as delivering platitudes. The platitude will undo any good work intended, by diminishing the trust of the receiver in the value of the feedback being given. Positive feedback that has been carefully considered in this way will lead to a stronger relationship between the giver and receiver and lay the foundations for a continuous feedback loop, controlled by the receiver.

Encourage self-assessment. It can be very helpful if you can encourage an individual to identify a pattern of behaviour or a problem for themselves by using gentle, probing questions, rather than by telling them outright what you think. This can cut down your hard work and also means that the individual is more likely to commit to change, as they feel they have ownership of the problem.

Techniques for receiving feedback

Be specific. This relates to framing what you would like feedback on. When asked, many people will say they want feedback on everything. However, it is important for the learning process that the receiver identifies areas they believe could be improved and asks the observer to look out for those areas in particular. For example, 'I would like feedback on the appropriateness of the handouts I used', or 'Could you tell me if I appear confident in front of the group?'

Listen. It can be tempting to leap in and explain why you did something, in an attempt to justify it. Instead, listen to the comments, clarify any points you need to, and then decide whether you feel the feedback is valid or not.

Verify – check it out. If you are unsure whether the feedback is valid, or even if you just want a second opinion, check out the feedback with someone whose opinion you value. Different people often have different views of the same thing.

Decide what you will do as a result of the feedback. If you decide that the comments are valid, decide on the consequences of using or ignoring them, and finally decide what you will do as a result of this. Ensure that you get additional feedback when you put into practice what you are learning.

Recognise a put-down. There will be occasions when someone gives you feedback designed to make you feel bad. Recognise the motive and don't let it destroy your confidence. It is not valid.