Managing feedback for more effective conversations

A toolkit for leaders

joyous

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If you're in any way worried about dealing with feedback in your teams - or you want to help other people in your organisation deal with their feedback - then this is the toolkit for you. To make training even easier we've included presentations for each section.

Meet Ruby

Ruby is Head of Product at Joyous. She has over 10 years experience in software organisations of all sizes, and has survived various stages of organisational growth. She understands what it's like to be in a large organisation - both as a leader and team member. Her mission is to support all working people, and especially leaders, live their best life at work.

" Hi! My name is Ruby, and I am nervous about responding to feedback.

Over the last 10 years I have been a leader of teams both large and small. I have been a leader of leaders. I have had both direct and indirect reports. I have worked in organisations of various sizes. Despite the experience I now have under my belt, I still occasionally feel anxious about dealing with feedback.

I have a number of fears when it comes to responding to feedback. Here are my biggest ones:

- I fear my response might make someone feel not how I intended.
- I fear that I will not be able to help, and that someone will feel let down.
- I fear (somewhat irrationally) that the feedback will be about me.

I do not consider myself a natural leader. While I am confident, organised and motivated to achieve good outcomes, I know these qualities alone do not make me a good leader.

When it comes to responding to feedback my default approach used to be to problem solve. Over time I've found myself listening more, empowering others, acknowledging good behaviours, and building meaningful relationships.

It surprised me to learn that this gentler approach is more effective. It has made the teams I have been a part of happier and more productive.

In this toolkit I share some of my favourite leadership tools with you. You can add them to your own leadership toolkit and apply them as you respond to feedback - both inside and outside of Joyous. "

A simple approach to difficult conversations

> About two years into my career as an engineering team leader I had to have a difficult conversation. The conversation was with Connor (not his real name), a junior engineer, who had recently joined our team.
>
> Connor was consistently arriving to work late, taking long lunches, and leaving early. As his team lead I knew that I needed to talk to him. So, I arranged a meeting.
>
> Not long before this I attended a leadership training course lead by Nick Reid, from Training for Change.
>
> Using the SCORE approach that Nick taught, I planned the conversation ahead of time. Using SCORE I felt comfortable that I had a plan which would leave Connor feeling supported while still addressing the situation effectively.
>
> When Connor and I met, I was able to confidently talk it through with him in under 10 minutes. After our chat was over, he even thanked me for it!
>
> Let's take a look at how I applied the SCORE approach to my conversation with Connor. And in case you were tempted, difficult conversations should always take place in person. This isn't the time for email...

Situation

To start a difficult conversation it is best to clearly describe the situation in as few words as possible.

"Connor, I've noticed that you are regularly arriving to work around 9:30, taking a one hour lunch, and leaving around 4:30."

Concern

Once you have clearly described the situation the next step is to explain why the situation is a cause for concern.

"I'm concerned you may not be working the hours specified in your employment contract."

Options

Next, it is important that you involve the person by offering them a choice of options on how to proceed.

While it's okay for you to have a preference, only offer options if you are comfortable following through on any of them. Remember, their comfort that is your top priority, not your own.

After you present the options it's important to give the person time to talk about why the situation is occurring, and how they would like to proceed.

As I looked to Connor for a response he admitted to not paying attention to the hours he was working. He sheepishly apologised, and said that working the full week was his preferred option.

"I can think of three options for us to consider moving forward.

First, if there is a personal reason for working reduced hours, we can talk it through and get HR to update your contract and salary to match your actual hours.

Second, you could increase your hours to 40 a week.

Finally, if you would rather work the additional hours from home, I would be happy to support you and set clear expectations of how that would work."

Risk

As you begin to round off the conversation it's important to explain what the risk is if the situation isn't addressed.

This is also an opportunity to express the risk in a way that makes it clear you want to protect them from it.

"I would hate for anyone in the team to think you weren't putting in the same effort as everyone else. Your reputation is important to me."

Expectation

It's important that the expectations moving forward are completely clear.

And there you have it. I walked out of that conversation feeling really good about how it had gone. We never had an issue with Connor's hours again. He went on to have a long career at the organisation, eventually becoming a well respected senior engineer.

"Thanks for your time. From tomorrow onwards my expectation is that you work 8 hours a day and take a 30 minute lunch break. I trust you to manage your time so that you work the full 40 hours each week. If you ever want to discuss this again, just let me know."

Download the presentation

Active listening in online conversations

Leaders sit somewhere on a value based spectrum, with efficiency on one end and empathy on the other.

Efficiency
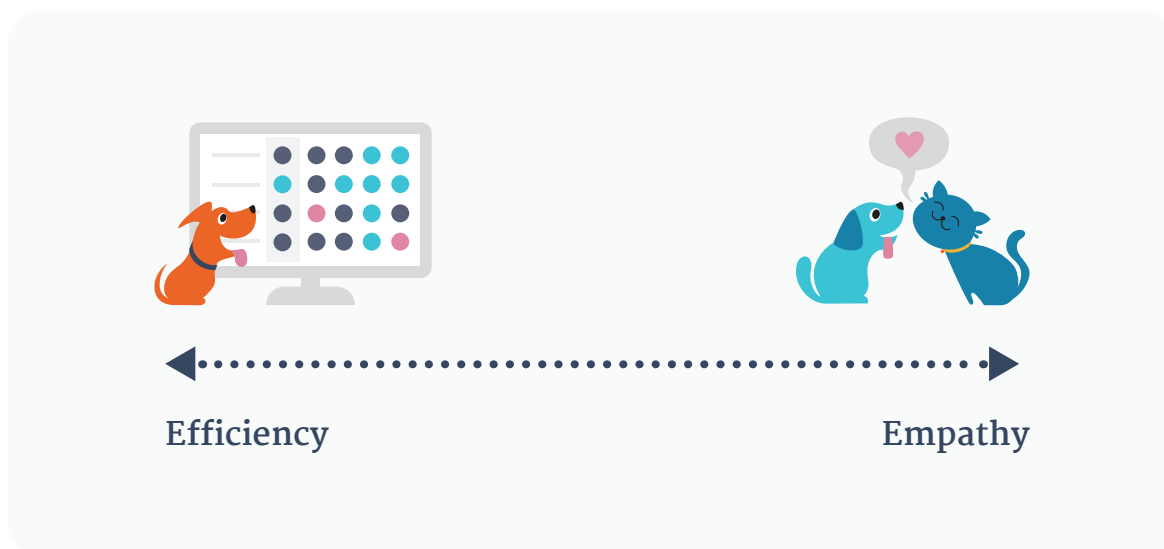
Empathy

Many start their career all the way on the efficiency end of the spectrum, believing that talking to people about their feelings is a waste of time. That's not true at all.

Leaders who value efficiency over empathy tend not to invest time in relationships with their team members. The result? Ironically, team efficiency is negatively impacted. Why? Because team members who don't have close relationships with their leader, and one another, are less productive.

Listening doesn't just help you form a bond with someone, it also helps you to become more influential within your organisation.

Professors at Columbia University's Business School conducted a study in 2012 to determine the best predictor of your influence at work. They wanted to determine whether it was your speaking abilities or your listening abilities that mattered more.

What they learned was that poor listeners tend to lack workplace influence, no matter how good they were at speaking. It is only when high verbal ability is coupled with strong listening skills that employees received high marks for being influential.

Applying active listening to online conversations

"Let me share a conversation I had in which I didn't listen very well. A member of our team approached me for feedback on a solution he had designed. He sent me an email outlining his approach.

On that day, like most days, I was busy. I skimmed his email and quickly jotted down some notes. My goal was to respond quickly, so that I could move on to other things. I had also solved a similar problem before. So, I sent a brief, constructive response in which I highlighted my previous similar experience followed by a few bullet points on what I'd change.

He made the changes I suggested, and we never talked about it again. At the time, I saw no problem with how I handled that.

Upon reflection, I doubt my response made him feel good. I did nothing to convey confidence in him, build his self-esteem, or make him feel supported. And, while I can't be sure if my response hurt our relationship, I am confident that it didn't help our relationship. The lesson I was teaching him was: If you want to get something right, ask me and I'll tell you what to do.

Particularly when it comes to a digital back and forth: it's easy to assume that the principles of active listening don't apply.

In reality, active listening matters more for online conversations, where room for misinterpretation is far greater when compared with talking in real life.

Here are five things I could have done to listen better during that email exchange.

Completely focus. I could have made sure that I was in a mental space to completely focus on his approach. Instead, I was more focused on my response. In conversation terms, this is the equivalent of selective or even passive listening, as opposed to active listening.

Wait before responding. I could have tried to resist the temptation to respond immediately. Considering this was an email conversation, waiting until the next morning would have been fine.

Ask good questions. Instead of replying to his email, it would have been even better to move the conversation to real life. Regardless, for those cases where I had suggestions, I could have first invited him to flesh out and clarify his thinking. Perhaps he had already thought about what I was going to suggest, and had good reasons for not doing it that way. Asking specific questions also indicates that not only are you listening, you are also comprehending it well enough to want to know more.

Offer validation. The next thing I could have done was to offer validation by recognising the effort he put in, and agreeing with his approach and thinking. If it turns out I didn't agree with what he was saying, validating that the topic was challenging may have been enough.

Be aware of the shift response. By referencing my previous similar experience what I thought I was doing was assuring him that my response was based on knowledge. Instead I was turning the attention to me. To be a better listener I could have tried to provide a support response, in which I could have given him the attention."

Online conversations using Joyous

3 — I find it easy to concentrate on my work

🦊 What are your biggest distractions at work?

I regularly get meeting requests appearing in my calendar at short notice. I find this very distracting.

Thanks for sharing that. How regularly would you estimate that this occurs? Is there any more you can tell me about this?

I would say it happens at least three times each week. Often I am in the middle of a job or trying to meet a deadline. So it makes me very nervous, but I also don't feel comfortable declining.

An example of asking good questions. Joe asked both a specific question and an open ended question. This combination encouraged a much deeper response from Jane.

7 — I am satisfied with the balance between work and other aspects of my life.

🦊 What helps you balance your work and other parts of your life?

Nothing helps me. I have to put deliberate thought into it. I tend to be preoccupied and forget.

I understand how you feel. If you would like to talk about it more, let me know and we can go grab a coffee.

I would appreciate that. Could we schedule coffee for next week? It will be good to talk this over!

An example of validation and resisting the urge to respond immediately. By arranging a real life conversation, Joe is allowing Jane an opportunity to talk more about an important subject.

Download the presentation

Fostering autonomy to encourage conversations

Don't kill the conversation before it starts

If someone comes to you wanting to talk, have a conversation. It doesn't matter if you already know about the situation, and there's already a plan for dealing with it. It's important that you listen first, so you know what the other person is bringing to the table.

If you jump straight to "Oh we already have a plan for this" what they actually hear is "We already know everything; we don't need you to tell us". That's a really good way to make sure nobody volunteers information in the future.

Listening first is also a good way to gain new insight or context on a particular situation. People are more likely to come forward if they feel strongly about something or have a personal stake in it. You may uncover information you didn't previously have!

Provide meaning and rationale

Connect someone's feedback to your broader context only once you have given them a good chance to elaborate. Explain your perspective on the situation and demonstrate how a successful outcome will benefit everyone involved.

By helping people understand your rationale you make it easier for them to buy into your outcome and contribute towards it. And if your plans change as a result of their input, be sure to acknowledge their contribution.

" Define the outcome, not the process

After many years of telling people exactly how to do things I've finally seen the light. Even in the context of a conversation in Joyous, many leaders jump straight to outlining the steps to resolving a problem. **Resist that urge completely!**

Instead, highlight the outcome that the organisation is aiming for, and don't use your team member's comments as an opportunity to explain the process you already have in mind.

Recognise contribution

Inviting your team member to explore solutions themselves and demonstrating that you value their input is an important way to grow their autonomy. It also helps them find their voice.

Encouraging people to voice an idea is just one part of this. If they voice a good one, you need to recognize that their idea has merit. This doesn't mean you're promising to follow through on it. Most people won't expect that (as long as you don't say that's what you're going to do!)

Of course if it is appropriate, you should consider doing something more with their contribution. This shows you really appreciate their input and encourages further engagement.

Allowing people the space to openly consider their own solutions is the first step in providing autonomy. This will lead to even more, even better conversations. "

Encouraging conversations in Joyous

How might we better help each other to learn and develop?

The training materials we used in yesterday's session look like they're straight out of the 1980s. I think if we're going to get the most out of our PD time we need to consider online training.

We looked into online training at the beginning of the year and it's just too expensive. Lucy's going to update some of the old stuff in the next couple of months. I'm sure it will be a lot better!

How might we better help each other to learn and develop?

The training materials we used in yesterday's session look like they're straight out of the 1980s. I think if we're going to get the most out of our PD time we need to consider online training.

I can tell you feel strongly about this! Sounds like you've used online training before? How was your experience? Any suggestions on how we could do it here?

I actually helped Acme develop a course in my last role. I still have contacts at the company we used - can we get together so I can explain what we did?

I didn't know that! I'll put some time in your diary tomorrow. Keen to pick your brain on this... Thanks. :)

In this exchange the employee hears "we've already decided what we're going to do." They may decide to press their case, but they'll probably just walk away.

The result? We diminish their contribution, discourage them from speaking up again, and we'll never know what value they may have added to an issue they obviously care about.

Instead of shutting the employee down, this time we encourage them to engage and voice their opinion.

In this case it turns out the employee has direct experience on this topic, and may even be able to help progress the outcome: better enabling learning and development in the company.

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Motivating people with positive feedback

It's surprisingly easy to get positive feedback wrong. Even more surprising to learn: motivational feedback is far more complex than "Good job, Lucy."

Did you know that excessive positive feedback is just as bad as no feedback at all?

Even worse, in team environments, undeserved positive feedback is demoralising to other team members. If that's made you want to run for the hills and never say a kind word again, here's what to do instead.

Deliver positive feedback in a way that will motivate your team members, using PRAISE.

You may also want to consider whether to deliver the feedback in public or in private. Public praise is powerful, but if you're praising everyone in public all the time it just isn't as effective.

So, how do you decide?

Behaviours that align with your organisational culture should be recognised publicly, to help set the example. Other positive behaviours are good candidates for private recognition.

Giving PRAISE

Lucy is a new member of the customer success team and has noticed that the team creates a new onboarding document every time they get a new customer. Each member of the team has their own flavour and style of onboarding, and they spend a few hours creating the content for each new customer.

One day Lucy approached her team lead, Craig, and showed him a template document she created that could be shared and easily re-used by the whole team. She'd reviewed what each team member was doing, and incorporated content from each team member's document into the template.

Here's how Craig could use the acronym PRAISE to deliver feedback that is more motivating than "Good job, Lucy".

P

Positive

Highlight the positive contribution someone has made. Praise is powerful motivator, so use it to build a healthy relationship.

"Lucy, what you have done here is wonderful."

R

Relevant

Helping someone to see how their work impacts others positively is another strong motivator. Sharing thanks, and relating good work back to end users or customers is ideal.

"This will save our customer success team a lot of time and effort, and ensure our customer messaging is consistent."

A

Appreciative

Be thankful. It's that simple.

"I appreciate the thought you put into this, and the way you combined something from everyone into the document. Thank you!"

I

Immediate

The longer the gap between the positive behaviour and your reaction, the less motivating it is, and the less likely it is to result in learning. Immediate praise is the most effective. Even if you're super busy, try to respond on the same day.

S

Strategic

Focus on praising the behaviours and traits you want to grow. This also feeds a person's need for competence by nudging them in the right direction.

"Doing things that make other people's lives easier is really valuable. Especially if it saves us from duplicating effort on activities we need to perform all the time."

E

Effort-focused

Always praise a specific effort; compliment a behaviour and not the person. The more generic the compliment the less we take it to heart, so specific praise is more meaningful.

"The template you created for onboarding new customers is really useful."

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Making tricky conversations easy

We recently analysed over 30,000 comments and found less than 5% of those contained both a negative theme and a negative sentiment. Tricky conversations are the exception, not the norm. But since you'll most likely encounter negative feedback at some stage during your leadership journey, it helps to have techniques for dealing with it.

One of these techniques is Anthony Suchman's relationship building statements: PEARLS.

Using one of these statements helps reduce tension. This reinforces your relationship and makes it easier to have an open conversation.

Partnership

I really want to work on this with you.

I bet we can figure this out together.

Empathy

I can feel your enthusiasm as you talk.

I can hear your concern.

Acknowledgement

You clearly put a lot of work into this.

You invested in this, and it shows.

Respect

I've always appreciated your creativity.

There's no doubt you know a lot about this.

Legitimation

This would be hard for anyone.

Who wouldn't be worried about something like this?

Support

I'd like to help you with this.

I want to see you succeed.

"

I wish I had known about these statements when I first became a team leader. I can still recall my first few tricky conversations as an engineering team lead. In particular, I recall how nervous I was about making it worse by saying the wrong thing.

One conversation in particular stands out. One of the engineers in our team informed me that she didn't want to attend our daily stand-ups. She went on to say she didn't want to report her daily progress at all. She was clearly unhappy that she was suddenly expected to do this.

My response was to outline the reasons why we all needed to attend the standup. In hindsight, that was the wrong thing to do. Instead of bringing her around, she became even more unhappy. We continued to disagree on team process, and eventually she left.

I wonder what might have been if I had focused on the relationship first.

"

Let's look at a few examples of Joyous feedback

Partnership

When an employee seeks to improve in an area of work, **Partnership** phrases can help to build your relationship:

> What are you most proud of in your work?

> I am proud but sometimes feel I can't deliver my best work with the number of tasks happening at the same time. At least I get to work on my time management skills!

> I would love it if we could look at this together, I could also benefit from improving this! Let's set up a time to catch up over coffee.

Empathy

This person is clearly upset. In this example you might respond with **Empathy**:

> How might we better help each other to learn and develop?

> How about allowing front line staff to go to conferences that relate to their jobs? Managers aren't the ones actually doing the work.

> I can tell you feel strongly about this.

Acknowledgement

When an employee offers a well thought-out suggestion you can **Acknowledge** their efforts:

> How might we better support each other?

> We need much clearer lines of responsibility and accountability. For example, who's responsible for hiring end-to-end? From advertising a position to getting the successful applicant fully trained and productive?

> I can see you've put a lot of thought into this.

Respect

When employees offer a solution to a problem, it is an opportunity to provide **Respect**:

> How can we improve the tools to help the team achieve its potential?

> I NEED A TOOLBOX so that I can do support stuff without interrupting people. I've started writing the spec already.

> I appreciate your proactivity!

Legitimation

When an employee raises an issue with an accompanied example, you can confirm their concerns using **Legitimation**:

> What tips would you share for billing a customer?

> Give us clear billing rules. One day we bill, the next we don't. Techs have no business telling customers what services to fix or replace.

> You're right. The billing rules are too complicated and we need to work on making them clearer.

Support

If an employee seeks to improve in a particular area of work, here lies an opportunity to offer **Support**:

> How might we better support each other?

> I need to work on better communication so that work that I'm testing doesn't create extra workload for the dev team.

> I'd love to help you with this.Let's get together and come up with some ways I can support you while you work this out.

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Filtering your feedback

Open and honest feedback is definitely the way to go; just remember to keep it human. Unnecessarily blunt and brutally honest feedback is more likely to alienate people than encourage them to engage in a dialog with you, or to make a positive change at work...

When in doubt, ask yourself: **how would I respond if someone said this to me?**

Is it true?

Do you have all the facts? Have you verified all accounts? You should have discounted any biases, gossip or hearsay before starting the conversation.

> I've spoken to Alice and Tim about their progress on this project. They'd like to show you what they're planning for stage 2 so everyone's on the same page.

Is it necessary?

Is this something that has to be said? Do you need to say it right now, or would it be better said in another forum, or at another time?

> I'd really like to talk through a couple of things in your proposal before you submit it. Let's find a time to sit down together tomorrow morning.

Is it kind?

Are you showing empathy and compassion? You can still have difficult conversations with respect for peoples' feelings; studies have shown people are more receptive to unfavourable feedback when it's delivered kindly.

> I know you're really upset about what happened today. I can come with you to talk to H&S if you need some support.

Is it helpful?

Will something positive result from saying this? If nothing happens as a result, did it even need to be said? How can you word your feedback in a way that encourages positive action?

> Thanks for letting me know about the scheduling problem - your recommendations were really useful. We can definitely rework the roster.

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Conversations checklist

- [ ] Use the SCORE approach for difficult conversations

- [ ] Completely focus

- [ ] Wait before responding

- [ ] Ask good questions

- [ ] Offer validation

- [ ] Be aware of the shift response

- [ ] Listen first

- [ ] Provide rationale

- [ ] Define the outcome, not the process

- [ ] Give PRAISE feedback: positive, relevant, appreciative, immediate, strategic, effort-focused

- [ ] Use PEARLS statements to build relationships: partnering, empathetic, acknowledging, respectful, legitimising, supportive

- [ ] Apply filters: is it true, necessary, kind and helpful?

Further reading

Best Place to Work - Ron Friedman

What great listeners actually do - HBR

The role of listening in interpersonal influence - Journal of Research in Personality

Moderators of employee reactions to negative feedback - Journal of Managerial Psychology

The Employee Experience Guide

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