

Feedback and Assessment

"A good evaluation is one from which students can learn."

Stephen Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher*

Useful feedback is

- Clear
- Specific
- Timely – done regularly and close enough to the experience being discussed that it isn't "ancient history"
- Affirming of Effort – acknowledges how hard someone worked even if they haven't achieved the goal
- Future Oriented –catapults the learner forward with action steps and hope

A fun acronym for good feedback is **EDGE**:

- **Explain** using a clear example of the exact behavior or action that prompts the feedback. Stick to facts
- **Describe** the effect of the behavior – what impact does it have on co-workers, on mentors, on their person's own learning process
- **Give** the recipient the mic. Invite them to speak about their viewpoint on this situation. Listen without reaction and try to understand their point of view no matter how much you may disagree. If the feedback is about an improvement that's needed, this is their chance to take responsibility for it – and that's what you want
- **End Positively**, with your encouragement and an action plan for how to move forward from this feedback

(adapted from *The Feedback Book*, by Dawn Sillett)

Try different forms of feedback, different locations, depending on the subject and the person.

- Informal or Formal
- Planned or Spontaneous
- While Walking or working together
- Over coffee or a meal

Different foci for feedback/assessment sessions:

- Overall well-being check in with mentee
- Skills Assessment, both technical skills (such as tractor use or bookkeeping) and interpersonal/leadership skills (communication, conflict resolution, time management, for example)
- Learning process
- Mentoring relationship
- Team Pulse

Whatever process you use, go into the conversation with these questions lodged in your mind and heart: "What can this person learn from my comment? What can I learn from his?" If you approach feedback with the apprentice's growth and goals at the forefront, your conversations will be thoughtful, engaged, and productive for you both.

Tools

Most of us will use the evaluation/feedback tools we've experienced ourselves at school or work. These may be quite limited in style and effectiveness. Or we'll use the tools we find effective – but these may *not* be the ones that work for your mentee. Nothing can sour a good apprentice like feedback sessions that don't take into account what the apprentice needs in order to receive and act upon your feedback.

Tips for Providing Feedback

What to Do	How to Do It	Example
Align feedback with the apprentice's professional goal	Provide concrete steps towards the goal, that are practical given time schedule and apprentice's current skills	"I have a few ideas that might help you move forward and they are..." "When I'm learning something new is I try ..."
Provide feedback on behaviors the apprentice can do something about	Talk about the specific behavior that is causing problems, rather than evaluating the behavior	"Tell me how you think your late nights might be affecting your learning?"
Remember that your perspective is not the same as your apprentice's	When you use an example from your life, set the context so apprentice can make connection between your example and their experience	"I know this may be different for you, but when I was having trouble learning tractor mechanics, here's what helped me"
Make sure you understand what is being said	Listen carefully. Ask questions to clarify and summarize what apprentice said	"If I understand what you are saying..." "Help me understand what you mean by explaining ..."
Be respectful in your tone of voice	Don't undermine the apprentice's self esteem	"I liked the way you ..." "I am curious about ..." "Have you ever considered trying ..."
Watch your own communication style and how that affects apprentice	Talk about the challenges everyone feels in a feedback situation and how important it is to be aware of each other's communication habits	"I find I get defensive when ..." "I react positively when someone ..."
If you aren't sure, get more information rather than give feedback	Ask for the information you need	"To be honest, I don't know enough about that right now and need more time"
Keep a future-focus	Link your feedback in this moment to the overall learning curve and apprentice's goals	"When you started here I saw ..., and now you are doing"

(Adapted from *The Mentor's Guide*, by Lois Zachery)

Frequency:

Try to have at least one "how's it going?" interaction each week with a mentee, so they know you are open to hearing how they are doing and what they might need to do well. A few good techniques:

- * While walking or driving to the next task, just ask them what's gone well that day, that week, or if they have any questions you can discuss during that travel time
- * Depending on time and the number of mentees you have, use The Muddiest Point, The One Minute Paper, the Critical Incident (explained below). These can be oral or written, and if you have many mentees, scheduling 5-10 minutes once a week gives

you and them a known opportunity to take the pulse of the educational and work environment. You can follow up with people as needed.

Some Feedback Processes to Try

3 accomplishments; 3 challenges

Have both you and your apprentice come up with a list of three things they accomplished since your last feedback session, and three challenges they either didn't take on or are next steps, given what they did accomplish. This helps you balance positive appreciation of small efforts and learnings, while also giving some 'hard truth' feedback on areas that need improvement or more focused attention.

The next four tools are adapted from *The Skillful Teacher*, by Stephen Brookfield

Learning Audit

Ask your apprentice to reflect on these three questions prior to a feedback session of any kind:

"What do I know now that I didn't know a week ago?"

"What can I do now that I couldn't do a week ago?"

"What can I now teach someone else that I couldn't teach them last week?"

This is a great prompt for any check in or feedback session, and for skill sheet assessments.

The Muddiest Point

Especially useful when you have multiple apprentices and need to know how well they are grasping a new skill or information. At the end of a training session or discussion/reading of a new concept, ask them to write down their answer to one of the following questions:

"What was the muddiest point for you in what we covered today?"

"What was the most confusing idea or element of what we did today?"

What was the most poorly explained idea or procedure today?"

What is least clear to you about the skill we practiced today?"

Their answers will help you know where they need more review, hands-on mentoring, and can improve your teaching skills.

One Minute Paper

A good one to use after a busy day packed with lots of potential learning, for example, a big cattle move on open range or planning the planting map for a new greenhouse.

At the end of the day, give apprentices one minute to write down "What was the most important thing I learned or did today?" To this, you can add a second question: "What can I do next to reinforce or further what I learned or did today?"

These questions shine a light on what an apprentice is learning when it gets busy and they may not realize what they've learned and what to do to keep it happening. It also helps you know if the learning experience was effective and what you can do as a mentor to keep the momentum going. It can reveal if an apprentice is ready to be autonomous with a particular task.

Critical Incident Questionnaire

A quick way to gauge how well apprentices are learning, as well as what might be getting in their way. It does double duty, since it also gives apprentices a way to give *you* feedback regarding your teaching and mentoring.

At the end of a week or a particular stretch of days, ask apprentices to write answers to the following:
“At what moment during this week/stretch of days did you feel most engaged with what was happening?”

“At what moment were you least engaged?”

“What action did your mentor or someone else take this week that was most helpful or affirming for you?”

“What action did they take that was most confusing or challenging for you?”

If you have more than one apprentice, this will help you see how effectively you are mentoring overall, as well as who is in need of some extra tutoring with a specific concept or skill.

This tool can be downloaded for free from <http://www.stephenbrookfield.com> A few more tools:

Significant Learnings

A significant learning is anything that deeply impacts the apprentice’s understanding or appreciation of some aspect of farming, ranching, or their own role in these professions. Ask your apprentice to reflect on one or two significant things learned since your last assessment session. These can be anything from learning how to drive or maintain the tractor to handling a conflict proactively and effectively to reading about a new seeding technique. Ask them to tell you about what it was they did, what they learned about themselves or the work/task/ideas, and how that might alter something about their work, study, or future. You might have to tease this out of your apprentice at first, so be prepared to keep asking questions to get them to think more fully about what they learned and why it matters to them.

This tool is especially effective after the apprentice has been on-site for a month or more.

Prompts for discussing the mentoring or learning process

“What’s going well in our mentor-apprentice relationship these lately?”

“What has been our biggest challenge in this relationship so far?”

“What are we each learning that can help us work together better?”

“Is there a particular skill that we never seem to get to?”

Appreciative Inquiry

Most of the time we go into analyzing an event, enterprise or even our entire business by looking at the problems, then trying to solve them. Appreciative Inquiry turns this on its head. Start with **DISCOVERING** what’s gone well.

*List what has gone well in the past week/month/learning plan

*Consider why this went well – personal qualities, good support, good planning, serendipity, etc.

*Identify an area you want to improve, a ‘problem’ or element that’s lacked focused improvement

*How can you apply the strengths listed in step 2 to strategize a path forward, a plan for improvement?

A Note about Rubrics

A rubric or skills matrix is a great tool for planning goals and assessing progress. But if that's all you do – check some boxes – without discussion of where and why progress has or hasn't happened, it's more a crutch than a scaffold for learning. A strong rubric does the following:

- Matches the stated purpose of the apprenticeship
- Identifies the overall goal/skill and breaks it down into small steps
- Makes clear what criteria is used to gauge successful accomplishment
- Easily prompts apprentice and mentor to create strategies to learn a skill which is being neglected, is proving harder to learn than expected, or doesn't have lessons built into the regular work the apprentice is asked to do

Getting Feedback from your Mentee(s)

The best and surest way to improve the feedback you offer to others is to get feedback *from* your mentees! Mentors may hesitate to put themselves in this position; after all, asking for constructive criticism regarding your teaching makes you vulnerable.

This is exactly *why* it is the best way to learn how to give helpful feedback. It puts you in the position of receiving input regarding what you do well, as well as where you are lacking, in spite of your best efforts to do a good job as a mentor. And you model how to ask for and receive feedback without becoming defensive.

Ask your apprentice to tell you how you are doing. Have you been clear about expectations, daily schedules, and outcomes you need from them? Do you clarify work priorities or inadvertently leave them guessing as to what you think is most important? Do you over-schedule yourself and run short of time or patience when trying to teach a new method of forage assessment or seed propagation?

Consider the questions you want them to ask themselves, in preparation for a feedback session, and ask them in relation to your own performance as mentor. A few such questions are:

“What have I done recently that was most helpful for you?”

“Is there something that's not working for you in how your education is going?”

“Are you having enough one-on-one learning time with me?”

“Tell me what's been useful and not useful in our interactions lately.”

Lastly, Resistance

Expect apprentices to be resistant or defensive; both are human nature in the face of criticism. Balance praise for effort and small accomplishments with corrective feedback, strive for a 5 to 1 or 3 to 1 ratio, the higher number being positive comments on what they are doing well, or how you see them applying effort regardless of present outcome. Apprentices will realize that your comments are in their best interests and are meant to help them achieve their goals.

If resistance continues, think of a time when *you* were resistant to constructive criticism. Why were *you* resistant? What triggered the resistance? Was there anything you or the other person did to help you get past it? Then think of something you find hard to do or learn, that someone else finds easy. These realizations may help you move past your frustration offer insights you can share. Relay a story about a learning challenge of your own. Ask them to tell you about a time in their past when they had to work harder than everyone else in order to learn something seemingly “simple.”

Resources

Brookfield, S. (2015). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pointeau, V., Sullivan, J., Wentzel-Fisher, S. (2015) *Agrarian apprenticeship: Growing the next generation of ranchers and farmers*. Santa Fe, NM: Quivira Coalition.

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Sillett, D. (2016). *The feedback handbook: 50 ways to motivate and improve the performance of your people*. London, UK: LID Publishing Ltd.

Zachery, L. J. (2000). *The mentor's guide: Facilitating effective learning relationships*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.