

CONSCIOUS WRITING

Strategies for Turning Fruitless Feedback Lectures into “Giftful” Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is a valuable tool that can identify strengths and weaknesses for personal and professional growth. Among medical communication teams, feedback is important not only for collaborating with colleagues but also for constructively navigating the writing process. As a result, medical communicators need strategies for giving and receiving effective feedback in a variety of professional areas. With “giftful” strategies, medical communicators can give feedback effectively, receive feedback gracefully, and collaborate on the path forward.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is a valuable tool for personal and professional growth. This tool helps us recognize our habits and behaviors so that we can harness our strengths and improve our weaknesses. Feedback is also not limited to a career stage, especially among medical communication teams. These teams need to not only collaborate as colleagues but also constructively navigate the cooperative, iterative writing process involved in producing a document. As a result, medical communicators need strategies for giving and receiving feedback on a variety of matters, including behaviors, perceptions, beliefs, and writing styles.

Although feedback is a valuable tool, many people have negative perceptions of the feedback process. These perceptions are often rooted in feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread from receiving bad feedback or feedback “lectures” in the past. But when feedback is done well, it is a gift—a gift of knowledge and understanding to support growth and advancement.

Over the years, I have picked up personal and professional guidance from mentors, advisors, coaches, therapists, books, courses, experience, and even trial and error. In this article, I share several strategies that I use to encourage “giftful” feedback related to writing, the writing process, and working with clients and colleagues. These strategies can help you to give feedback effectively, receive feedback gracefully, and collaborate on the path forward.

GIVING FEEDBACK

Ask for Permission

Before delivering feedback, ask the receiver for permission to share feedback. This approach lets the receiver know that feedback is coming so that they can mentally prepare for the discussion. Also, when asking for permission, ask with a yes or no question. This approach creates buy-in because the receiver can say “yes” or “no,” which gives them a sense of autonomy. However, you may want to avoid the most dreaded question: “Can I give you some feedback?” This question contains the word “feedback,” which can stir up emotions of anxiety, fear, and even panic. Instead, ask a question that avoids this word. For example, you might ask, “I have some ideas for how we might improve the draft. Can I share them with you?” Or “Do you have 10 minutes to discuss how that project went?” This question also gives a time limit, which may put the receiver at ease for how long they may have to endure a potentially difficult discussion.

Give Credit

People tend to be quick to give negative feedback and slow to give positive feedback (if they give positive feedback at all). This tendency may be due to the association of feedback with *constructive criticism*. But positive feedback is just as constructive as negative feedback. Knowing *what to do* is just as important as knowing *what not to do*. So when giving *constructive criticism*, be sure to give *constructive credit* as well. This credit will help to encourage good behaviors or writing habits. If giving positive feedback does not come naturally to you (yet), you might take an extra pass through a draft to focus on highlighting the positive characteristics. Or before a discussion, you might brainstorm the positive and negative aspects of the situation so that you can touch on the positive aspects as well.

Be Specific

Great feedback goes beyond vague or general statements, which can seem more like opinions than feedback. Great feedback is thoughtful, intentional, and specific. When giving feedback, be sure to give data for what you noticed.

For example, avoid general statements like “You’re writing isn’t very good.” Instead, be specific with a statement like, “I noticed that you used a lot of long sentences in that draft.” Also, avoid absolutes like “always” and “never,” which can divert focus from the topic at hand and even trigger defensiveness and a search for exceptions. For example, avoid the absolute statement, “You never meet deadlines.” Instead, use data with a statement like, “You said that you would give me your draft by Monday, but I don’t have it yet.” Specificity is also important for positive feedback because it encourages what to keep doing. For example, avoid sharing a simple, “Great job on those revisions!” Instead, get specific with a statement like, “I really like how you logically guided readers through that concept.”

Highlight Impact

To help the receiver understand the reason for the feedback, be sure to highlight the impact of their behavior. Share how that behavior impacted you, the team, or the organization. Or share how the writing in that draft impacted the project or the potential reader. By highlighting the impact, you give logic, meaning, and purpose to the feedback. For example, avoid simple statements like, “I didn’t get the draft on Monday.” Instead, highlight the impact: “Because I didn’t get the draft on Monday, I had to shift my schedule around and delay other projects.” Or avoid giving an opinion with a statement like, “I really like how you used a variety of sentence lengths.” Instead, expand on that opinion with logic and meaning: “I really like how you used a variety of shorter and longer sentences. They helped to add rhythm to the writing to keep me engaged while reading.”

Get Personal

Feedback is very personal and can be affected by many factors, including personal styles, cultural influences, generational differences, and environmental attributes. Get to know as much as you can about a person and their communication style. Also, be sure to consider how you deliver feedback and tailor your feedback to the receiver. For instance, some people prefer indirect feedback that has a “softer landing,” whereas other people may find indirect feedback unclear and confusing. For example, consider the feedback, “You might consider reversing the second and third sentences to smooth the flow in this paragraph.” This feedback might be received as encouraging guidance by one person and as an optional suggestion by another. Conversely, some people prefer direct feedback that is straight to the point, and others may react with defensiveness or withdrawal. These reactions can also trigger the giver to justify or backpedal their feedback, heightening emotions in the discussion. For example, consider the

direct feedback, “This paragraph is disjointed.” This feedback might lead to the receiver reacting with explanations, such as that they were rushed to meet a tight deadline. This reaction could then lead to the giver justifying the deadline with pressure they’re getting from the organization.

Confirm Understanding

Like all communication, feedback requires 2 important considerations: how the message is given and how the message is received. And how your feedback is received can help you understand whether you gave that feedback effectively. When giving feedback, notice how your feedback was received. Pay attention to the receiver’s facial expressions and body language to understand whether your words are resonating with them. You might even ask them to repeat back your feedback in their own words so that you know your message was received the way you intended. However, be careful to not make this request in a patronizing way. To avoid this scenario, you might explain that you are asking because you want to understand how your message was received so you can clarify or refine your message if needed.

Offer Support

Feedback can seem like a lecture or sharing of opinions without clear direction on how to move forward. To avoid this scenario, when giving feedback, consider not just what happened but also what’s next. When possible, share resources to help the receiver improve. For example, you can offer regular check-ins to help track progress. Or you can share articles, books, and trainings to help the receiver learn new skills. Or you can encourage work with coaches and consultants who can give the receiver one-on-one support in learning new skills and tracking progress. Although these resources may require time and financial investments, the return on these investments will support not only the receiver but also the giver, the team, the project, and the organization.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Be Open-Minded

Feedback is an essential part of the learning process and can be a powerful tool for growth. But it can also be hard to receive, especially if it feels like criticism or a personal attack. To see feedback as an opportunity to improve, keep an open and calm mind. Be willing to listen and consider other perspectives and experiences. Remind yourself that no one is perfect and that mistakes are opportunities to improve. If you need time to process, ask for some time before continuing the discussion.

Review Objectively

Your work and your writing are extensions of yourself. You invest considerable time and energy collaborating on projects and pouring words onto the page that precisely, accurately, and even creatively reflect your thinking. As a result, you may struggle to not take feedback personally. But rather than take feedback *personally*, take feedback *objectively*.

Treat the feedback like data. Explore it. Analyze it without judgment. Look for patterns and outliers. This process helps you identify what you understand, what the meaning is, and what you want to learn from it. For example, if a coauthor shared that they did not like how you reworded a sentence, consider that feedback objectively and ask questions to understand the feedback better. What did the coauthor not like about the rewording? Did the change conflict with their typical writing style? What was your reasoning for rewording the text the way you did? Did you need to follow a certain style guide? Or did you think that the sentence was clearer with the rewording?

Get Curious

When you explore feedback like data, you also have to consider confounding factors that might introduce bias. So you need to ask questions about the feedback and get curious about the situation. Who is giving you the feedback, and do you value their perspective? Is their feedback a reflection of them or you? For example, if you got feedback from someone who does not have as much writing experience as you, you might not agree with their feedback. On the other hand, if they have more experience than you and you admire their writing approach, you might appreciate their feedback. You also might ask, what was their state of mind during the situation or when they were giving you feedback? What was your state of mind during the situation or when they were giving you feedback? Did something significant happen beforehand that may have affected their or your perception? For example, did you just have a disagreement with a family member before starting your work day, which might make you feel more sensitive than usual? Did the person giving you feedback just finish leading an intense meeting with leadership about budget cuts at the organization? When you ask these questions and get curious about the situation, you can uncover the roots of the feedback so that you can clarify the best next steps.

Extract Truths

Feedback is a gift that can help you uncover blind spots. Although not everyone gives gifts that you want, you can usually uncover at least a hint of truth or nugget of wisdom in the feedback. No matter the situation, or whether the feedback is positive or negative, you can reflect on the

feedback and situation, find the hint of truth, and keep it. Then let the rest go. For example, someone might suggest that you expand the discussion about a certain topic you mention in the document that you wrote. You might recognize that the topic is important and would be interesting to expand on (hint of truth). However, you also acknowledge that a discussion about that topic would be tangential to the central message or beyond the scope of the document, so you let the feedback go. As another example, someone might suggest that you use passive voice because that is the style they see in most of the literature. Although you agree that passive voice has been a historical convention in medical writing (hint of truth), you also know that this convention is shifting to support more active voice. So, depending on the circumstance, you might choose to let go of their suggestion and prioritize active voice. Or you might discuss your rationale with the giver to establish your credibility, get their buy-in, and strengthen your working relationship.

Develop Strategy

When you receive feedback, that is only the first step in addressing the feedback. The next step is to take action. Consider the feedback and choose what to stop, start, and continue doing. Create a plan to take advantage of any resources you received or can find. Read articles and books, sign up for courses and workshops, enlist the help of a coach or consultant, and schedule time to follow up with the person who gave you feedback. Only through action can you change and improve.

COLLABORATIVE FEEDBACK

Consider Environment

When discussing feedback, people often consider what they are saying or how they are saying it. But they do not always consider where they are saying it. The environment and how you place yourself in it can affect how feedback is given and received. When discussing feedback, especially about a negative or sensitive topic, find somewhere private to talk. Make sure that everyone in the conversation is either standing or sitting to foster connection and avoid feelings of dominance or hierarchy. If you are discussing a problem, avoid sitting across from one another, especially in a supervisor's office, which can feel intimidating for an employee. If you can, have everyone sit on the same side of a desk or table. With this approach, you can avoid seeing the issue as a problem "between you" and instead see the issue as a problem "in front of you." This perception can help you discuss the problem as though you are on the same side and working together to fix the problem. Be sure to consider any other aspects of the environment to ensure you set the discussion up for success. For example, if you work remotely and

are discussing feedback virtually, consider how you appear on the screen. If you are the giver, avoid sitting close to the camera, which can feel intimidating to the receiver. Be sure that you are far enough back that the other person can see your torso and even your hands, which can make the conversation feel less threatening. Be extra mindful of your tone, words, facial expressions, and body language because these factors will be more pronounced in a virtual setting.

Reciprocate Feedback

Traditionally, feedback was unidirectional (supervisor to employee, client to freelancer). This unidirectional approach can put the giver in a position of dominance and the receiver in a position of vulnerability. But opening the feedback conversation both ways can transform an information-delivering lecture into a problem-solving discussion and, when appropriate, support a mutual feeling of vulnerability. For example, after sharing feedback, you might ask, “How do you see it?” or “What do you think?” This approach helps to create connection, collaboration, and commitment rather than compliance. However, when opening the conversation, be careful that the discussion does not become a retaliatory or competitive exchange that can degrade the feedback or even damage the relationship. Focus on fostering an open, honest dialogue that will strengthen the relationship.

Practice Continually

Feedback is often episodic (infrequent and isolated), which may contribute to anxiety around feedback discussions. To reduce this anxiety, have a consistent flow of continual feedback. Take advantage of opportunities to practice giving and getting feedback. Offer feedback regularly. Avoid waiting for

feedback and ask for it. For example, you might ask for feedback during weekly check-ins with your supervisor rather than waiting for annual performance reviews. Or you might ask a client for feedback a few weeks after sending a deliverable rather than just waiting to see if they respond. When you ask for feedback, you hold the power and show that you are a continual learner.

Be Kind

The process of giving and receiving feedback can be fraught with emotion. During the process, be mindful of your tone and emotions. Avoid language that is demeaning or disrespectful, and choose words that are encouraging and considerate. Avoid reacting, and respond with consideration and positive intention. Lead every interaction with kindness that shows your motivation to strengthen one another, the project, the team, and the organization.

SUMMARY

Feedback can be challenging to give and receive, especially when negative perceptions and emotions are involved. But when done well, feedback is a gift. With effective feedback strategies, you can have constructive and “giftful” discussions that not only develop working relationships and professional skills but also benefit documents, readers, medical communicators, writing teams, and organizations.

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