

The Manager's Feedback Playbook

Your definitive guide to
mastering effective
feedback



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Welcome to your manager's feedback playbook. My aim is to give you everything you need to get started in becoming an expert in all things feedback. That's both for yourself and also for the benefit of your teams and colleagues – to help foster an effective feedback culture that helps everyone to learn and grow.

What's all the fuss about feedback?

For many people **the feeling most associated with feedback is anxiety**. If you're a manager, the thought of having to have a difficult conversation with someone in your team around something they need to improve is enough to get your pulse rate up and nerves kicking in. And if you're on the receiving end, most of us would rather avoid it, probably based on past experiences we'd rather forget.

Add to this the fact that **most managers have never had any support or training on how to make feedback effective**. We know it's something that's important to get right but struggle to know how to put it into practice.

Luckily there are ways to solve this. Done right, **feedback can become something that really helps everyone**. By thinking a little differently and learning and practising some core skills, you can play a key role in creating an effective feedback culture for your teams and organisation.



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Who's Clem?

I'm a professional leadership coach, trainer and facilitator with an extensive background in tech leadership. Over the years I've helped many people, teams, leaders and organisations get to grips with effective feedback culture.

In this playbook I'll walk you through my tips and insights around how to make feedback something that's actually valued rather than feared.



1. Why is feedback valuable?

Let's start with why we'd even want to think about feedback in the first place. **Why is it valuable** for ourselves and others to receive feedback?

It's how we learn. Feedback is information. With information we can assess the world around us. When we receive feedback we find out how our actions are impacting and build and tune our approach based on this. We learn and grow as a result.

It reveals blindspots and provokes new thinking. We see the world through our own lens. Feedback helps us spot things we may not have considered and prompts us to think from new perspectives.

It deepens our understanding of our strengths and weaknesses. We all have things we excel at, but we may not know why, or how much value this bring to others. Likewise, there will be areas we can improve. Feedback helps brings clarity and build our understanding of what these strengths and weaknesses are.

It reminds us that others see the world differently. In an increasingly divided world it's more vital than ever to realise that we don't all have the same thoughts, values and beliefs. Feedback reminds us that there are different viewpoints and ways of approaching things. Even if we don't agree, it helps us to develop empathy and understanding for those around us.



2. What makes it difficult?

Feedback involves humans and communication — both topics of considerable complexity! So it's not hard to understand why **both giving and receiving feedback is hard**. Here's some **key traps** that often cause things to go wrong:

We make it too soft. For fear of a reaction, be that upset, anger or confrontation, we attempt to soften constructive feedback often by skirting around it, offering platitudes or watering it down. This makes it confusing and hard to act on.

We make it too hard. "In the spirit of radical candor..." to mention the excellent book on feedback by Kim Scott, we go in too hard, being blunt or judgemental because we believe they need to hear it. This risks a fight, flight or freeze reaction, as the person feels under attack, and again we fail to land our message in a way which helps.

We make it too formal. More on annual reviews later, and why they're not the place for feedback, associating feedback with formality increases power gradients and brings in other dynamics.

We make it too casual. We throw in feedback in passing, in the corridor or coffee shop, without having thought it through. This makes it hard to recognise and digest; feedback needs space.

We forget cognitive dissonance. When feedback conflicts with our often deeply held beliefs, cognitive dissonance occurs. The new data is discarded as a defense mechanism.



3. Pre-requisites for feedback

Before we get into techniques for effective feedback, we need to look at some pre-requisites that allow feedback to be effective. Without these in place, attempts to build an effective feedback culture will have limited impact.

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes.

Dr Amy Edmondson, 1999

Psychological safety is critical to being able to share and receive feedback. Without it people will be fearful of new information, or sharing their thoughts with others. Your role as a manager is to foster psychological safety within in your teams, bringing curiosity, empathy and vulnerability to show that it's OK to not be perfect and to learn and grow. This isn't about everyone being comfortable, it's about creating the conditions where feedback is seen as helpful and supportive rather than a threat.

For more help with psychological safety, have a look at my workshop [A tech leader's guide to psychological safety](#).



Intention

Encourage feedback for the right reasons

Ask yourself the question, **What is my intention in wanting to give and receive more feedback?** Be clear on your intent for what increasing feedback aims to achieve. In my view feedback is all about helping people to continuously grow and improve, to create an effective learning environment which in turn supports high-performing teams.

Feedback that's geared purely towards grading performance, for example, isn't really going to impact in terms of a positive and engaged culture or help people grow.

Model what good looks like

Provide great examples

Feedback is important, but it's not the only tool. It's equally important to **provide examples of what good looks like**. People don't just learn by receiving feedback, they learn by observing and copying existing models and by building on these. Ensure you're giving people the opportunity to do so.



4. Making feedback effective

Let's turn now to what we can do to make feedback effective. For feedback to be useful, supportive and helpful we need to think carefully about how to construct it. We can use the STOFFS model to check both the feedback we give, and receive.

Specific
Timely
Open-minded
Frequent
Focused on behaviour
Supportive

Specific. Focus on the specifics. What are the facts? The more detailed the better. This helps people really understand what to focus on.

"I thought the clarity of your slides was excellent, you kept to one clear point per slide with minimal text. This really helped the message land."

Timely. Give feedback as close to the event as possible, while being mindful of context such as a group setting. This helps it be fresh in everyone's minds.

"Are you open to some feedback on the meeting we've just left?"



Open-minded. Feedback is one person's perception of reality. Be open and curious about how the other person sees things and be willing to adapt your view point.

"How do you feel the design session this morning went? I was concerned that the stance you took on standards didn't land well with Clive, he seemed to me to really shut down. I'm interested in how you saw things and what you felt was going on."

Frequent. Don't batch feedback for formal reviews or infrequent check-ins. Frequent feedback helps make it normal and allows you to focus on one thing at once.

"If you're open to some feedback on the login component, let's chat about that today. Then we can pick up on other aspects of your new role tomorrow or next week."

Focused on behaviour. Avoid attributing things to someone's character or otherwise make it personal. By separating behaviours and actions from the individual we remain more neutral and open and avoid judgements.

~~"I can't believe how uncommitted you are"~~

Instead:

"You'd agreed to send the report by the end of Friday and it arrived on Tuesday the following week"

Supportive. Show your intention is to support and that you're invested in helping them learn and grow.

"I spotted a number of errors in your reports over the last few weeks. As I know myself how confusing the data can be, if there's aspects that are proving difficult I'd be happy to sit down and walk through it with you"



5. How to ask for feedback

Keeping STOFFS in mind we can now come on to some techniques to help us tackle feedback conversations expertly.

Technique 1 is **how to ask for feedback well**. The reason for starting with Ask is deliberate. As a manager one of the best ways to encourage feedback is to show what good looks like, by asking for it regularly yourself. This helps lower power gradients and helps others feel safe to do likewise. See five ways to think differently for more reasons why pull is better than push!

We can **use STOFFS to help make our ask for feedback** effective:

Specific. Focus your ask on something specific that the person can concentrate on.

Timely. Time your request for feedback just before an event, this helps gives clarity and timeboxes the request.

Open-minded. Asking up-front gives them permission to share their views and sets up the expectation of an open conversation.

Frequent. Do this regularly and you benefit from lots of feedback and set a great example.

Focused on behaviour. See specific, you're helping keep things non-personal and modelling good feedback practices.

Supportive. You're showing you value their thoughts.

"Emma, would you be able to give me some feedback on the client meeting we're doing later today? I'm specifically looking to see if I can ask more open questions to get them to share their real challenges. I'd be really interested in your thoughts on how well I do this and whether it makes any difference."



6. How to give feedback

There are many techniques for giving feedback but the *feedback sandwich* aka **“the sh*t sandwich” is not the technique to choose!** While well intentioned, it’s either confusing or patronising depending on whether the person knows about it and spots it.

My preferred technique I call **See, Think, Feel, Intent** and is based on the work of the [Better Conversations Foundation](#). This gives us a practical way to think through and deliver feedback to help it land well. Here’s how it works:

See. “What I saw/heard was ...”. Share your observations, the specifics of what you saw or heard.

“What I saw in the design meeting was that on at least three occasions, you interrupted Emma before she’d had chance to finish ”

Think. “What I inferred from that was ...”. State your thinking and assumptions. This is your personal view and allows them a different take.

“What I inferred from that was that you didn’t value what Emma had to say, or that you got caught up in your own idea too much”



Feel. “The impact on me was ...”. Share what you felt as a result. This shows them why it’s valuable to share and the impact it had on you personally.

“The impact on me was that I felt annoyed that Emma wasn’t getting to speak and also awkward and anxious as the client was present too”

Intent. “My intention in giving this feedback is ...”. And finally share why you’ve taken the time to give this feedback. Note this is optional if it’s clear from the first three parts but can help to emphasise that you’re aiming to support.

“My intention in giving this feedback is to share my view that cutting across others can stifle ideas and stop people speaking up”

Note this isn’t intended as a script necessarily. I find it helps me organise my thoughts before a feedback conversation and keeps me aligned to the STOFFS approach. It’s important to ensure it opens up into a two way conversation too.

It works for positive feedback too, helping you really bring to life the positive things you’ve observed.

If you try this technique out, let me know how you get on!





7. How to receive feedback

It's worth recognising that we've arguably saved the hardest until last! What makes it difficult to receive feedback is that rarely do we set out to do a bad job. I believe that the majority of people approach things with good intention and use their current knowledge, skills and beliefs to guide them to what they believe is a good outcome. So when we receive feedback that runs counter to this it can be hard to hear, sometimes even if it's positive!

Here's an approach to help you get the best out of feedback, both in the moment and later on.

Thank them. When someone gives you feedback, whether you agree with it or not, it's worth thanking them for taking the time to do so. It anchors you on a response that's not defensive and lets them know you've heard them.

Avoid defending. It's natural to want to defend, especially if you disagree. In doing so you miss out in useful information, which you can reflect on later. Instead of defending, aim to ask open questions to clarify what they mean and add detail.

"You mentioned I came across as defensive in the meeting. What kind of defensive is that?"



Take some time to reflect on the feedback you received. The more curious you can be the better!

It's all just data. Remember all feedback is just data. It's another person's view which they've shared with you. That data could be really valuable to help you see things from a different perspective but ultimately you're empowered to use, adapt or discard as you wish. Not all feedback is valuable, but some will be.

ABC coaching

ABC coaching. A coaching technique called ABC can be helpful to use, either working with a coach, or as a self-reflection exercise:

A is for **Activating event**. What was the situation or event that happened and what are your observations? Ideally from your direct recollection or as shared with you

B is for **Beliefs**. What do you believe about this? What are you thinking? But then question are those beliefs or thoughts true? Or limiting you in some way, perhaps from seeing a different way of thinking. Are they helpful?

C is for **Consequences**. What are the consequences of those beliefs? What's the impact? How do you feel about it? If the feelings are negative, it can be useful to loop back to B and aim to explore or even override your thoughts with a more positive explanation.



8. Feedback culture

The **ultimate goal is to create an effective feedback culture**. One where feedback is not a euphemism for performance reviews or instructing people what to do. Or consigned to formal HR processes and given in a strictly hierarchical way. Instead, a culture where feedback is a continuous flow of information which helps people learn, grow and take on new perspectives, and which leads to high-performing teams and organisations.

A feedback culture is where people use a continuous flow of feedback to help experiment, to learn, to share perspectives and to grow

As a manager or leader you have a key part to play in making this happen. In addition to what we've learnt so far around how to make feedback effective, this section provides some additional ideas to help build in feedback at all levels of your organisation.



Peer-to-peer micro-feedback

Provide feedback training to everyone, not just managers! Our aim is **get people used to providing micro-feedback to each other** as part of day-to-day collaboration, sharing learning, different perspectives and building on each others strengths.

"That's interesting, how did you move that without using the mouse? I didn't release that was possible. Do you know about command+D too?"

Team feedback rituals

Encourage teams to **implement regular team level feedback rituals**. Like retrospectives in agile, these are opportunities for teams to share what they value in each other and how they can support each other to grow. Make sure these are confidential within the team and in the spirit of learning and growth, not ranking or judging.

"Emma's helped us massively this sprint with the new acceptance criteria. Using examples has really helped make things more specific. Emma, are you able to work with Clive next week to show him your approach?"



Career development sessions

There is of course a place for conversations around progression and career aspirations, and feedback will be part of this. My suggestion is to make these a regular thing, certainly not annually, and decoupled from any formal promotions. That way, when progression opportunities arise people already have a good idea where they stand.

“What are you hoping to get out of the new project Clive? How do you feel it will help you to progress?”

If you're working on implementing a feedback culture and would value some expert guidance to help get started, please get in touch!





9. Five ways to think differently

As a final bonus I've included five ways to think differently about feedback. Each are designed to challenge the norms and to encourage you to think about how approaching feedback from a different perspective could benefit your teams and organisation.

1. There is NO place for feedback in performance reviews

Performance reviews are the worst environment for feedback: infrequent, vague, and loaded with power dynamics. Feedback should be normal, frequent, and part of everyday conversations—not a yearly “learning opportunity.” If someone hasn't heard it before, a review isn't the time. Ban feedback from performance reviews and instead weave it into regular collaboration and catch-ups.

2. STOP giving people feedback they didn't ask for

Unsolicited feedback often triggers defensiveness, feels subjective, and lands badly. Instead, make asking for feedback the norm. When we ask, we own it, are more open to it, and shift the focus to learning. Leaders should model this by requesting feedback from colleagues, even direct reports, showing that feedback is about growth, not hierarchy.



3. Tell people what they're good at, NOT what they should improve

We spend too much time spotting flaws and not enough highlighting strengths. Positive, specific feedback helps people see their value, boosts confidence, avoids defensiveness, and amplifies impact. Focusing on strengths ripples out into teams and organisations far more effectively than nit-picking weaknesses. Build a culture where people know and play to what they do best.

4. STOP giving top-down feedback

Feedback becomes distorted by hierarchy. Power gradients reduce agency, stifle discussion, and make feedback feel like judgment, not support. Instead, normalise peer-to-peer feedback where colleagues ask, give, and receive insights in a psychologically safe way. Managers should stop “giving” feedback and focus on fostering environments where feedback flows laterally, as learning across the team.

5. Providing examples BEATS providing feedback

Feedback isn't the only way to help people grow. Modelling good practice, showing examples, and giving people opportunities to observe skilled colleagues is often more powerful. This approach empowers autonomy, sparks inspiration, and allows people to adapt what works for them. Instead of telling people to improve, give them access to examples that show what good looks like.



10. Feedback mastery workshop

If you're a leader looking to take your feedback skills to the next level, my Feedback Mastery for Tech Leaders is for you! Tested and evolved at multiple organisations over the years it's helped many teams get to grips with how to master effective feedback.

Feedback mastery for tech leaders

[Find out more](#)

How to succeed at seeking, giving and receiving feedback and apply these skills as a tech leader to help your teams learn and grow

Key outcomes

- Create the environment for effective feedback by breaking down the challenges and implementing practical steps to address them.
- Design effective feedback using recipes for seeking, giving and receiving feedback, and practice these in interactive exercises.
- Develop a plan to support you and your teams to increase the flow of feedback using tried and tested approaches.
- Practice and learn to master feedback alongside a cohort of fellow tech leaders in a safe, supportive environment.



About Clem

Clem is an independent coach and consultant focused on helping senior technology leaders increase both their impact and personal fulfilment through compassionate, people-focused leadership. He combines a background in technology and consultancy with his ICF-accredited coaching practice to help individuals and organisations create the conditions for better communication, high-performing teams and inclusive, engaging company culture.

Clem brings experience from a wide range of leadership roles spanning engineering, test, architecture, people operations and tech academies. He's known for his empathetic and warm style and strongly believes that organisations that put humanity first are also the most successful.



People-first coaching and consultancy

I work as an executive and leadership coach and tech culture consultant, as well providing expert training and facilitation.

If you're at a new level in your leadership journey and looking to find your feet, I can help you build the skills and confidence to be successful, while retaining and developing your own authentic style.

Or if you're looking for expert help in making your organisation a high performing and genuinely people-first company then get in touch to find out more about group coaching, training and consultancy services.



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