



## Giving Feedback



# Overcoming Your Fear of Giving Tough Feedback

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by **Melody Wilding**

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Juan Moyano/Stocksy

**“I felt like I was going to throw up,”** Filip confessed to me during our coaching session. “Giving feedback is something a leader should be able to do every day without breaking a sweat,” he said. “But for me, it feels like the end of the world.”

Filip was the director of project management at a company that offered translation services for streaming content providers across the globe. Hard working (sometimes to a fault), Filip was an expert at juggling multiple priorities, coordinating translators, quality control experts,

and client liaisons across time zones, languages, and cultures. He had a knack for thriving in ambiguity, keeping his eye on strategic goals without getting lost in minutiae.

Filip also prided himself on always having his team's back, even if it involved taking the heat from an irate executive. But when it came to delivering feedback to his direct reports, Filip's resilient exterior crumbled. He would be overcome with worries of damaging the relationships he had worked so hard to build. He'd overthink what to say for hours — sometimes days. The mere thought of uttering the words, "I have some feedback for you," made him nauseous.

When a high-stakes project spearheaded by Angelique, one of Filip's brightest team members, failed, it brought his fear of giving feedback into sharp focus. For two weeks Filip had sensed something was amiss. The team's low spirits and sluggish performance concerned him, but he told himself Angelique would pull everything together in the end. He never voiced his concerns, and the cost was devastating. Their biggest account would now be going to a different provider who could provide better service.

"I could have prevented this. I should have spoken up." Filip told me. His story echoes a struggle I hear from many of my executive coaching clients: How do I overcome the fear of giving feedback? Whether you worry about causing tension, demotivating your people, or handling others' emotional reactions, conflict aversion is a common trait, and managers aren't immune to it.

You're not doing anyone a favor by avoiding conflict. When problems go unaddressed or are swept under the rug, everyone suffers, including you. A lack of constructive feedback is also detrimental to your team, depriving them of mentorship and growth opportunities. Workplaces

marked by poor communication and unclear expectations are breeding grounds for low trust and disengagement.

Here's how to navigate the sense of discomfort and apprehension that comes with difficult conversations, so you can say what needs to be said.

### **Challenge binary thinking.**

Many leaders who avoid confrontation carry assumptions like, “no one likes a micromanager,” or “bringing up this issue will ruin our working relationship.” While these beliefs may stem from past experiences with rejection and failure, they reflect inaccurate, binary thinking. In actuality, it's possible to be both assertive and direct without damaging relationships or earning a reputation as the “difficult manager.”

Instead, focus on what you could gain by speaking up and the potential rewards of clear communication. Not only will voicing your thoughts help you feel more confident, but:

- Your input may be exactly what's needed to drive a challenging assignment to completion
- That candid comment you make to a coworker about their disruptive behavior could result in a more peaceful, productive work environment.
- Your constructive criticism could help a team member develop and grow in their role, opening up new career opportunities

When you look more closely, you'll see that expressing your thoughts, feelings, and opinions is far more beneficial than stuffing them down and suffering the consequences.

## **See feedback as a tool.**

Despite what you may believe, your team craves meaningful, candid feedback. While 72% of employees rated “managers providing critical feedback” as important for them in career development, only 5% believe managers provide such feedback. Likewise, when team members don’t think their boss is great at giving honest feedback, their engagement scores typically take a nosedive. But on the flip side, leaders who rank in the top 10% at giving honest feedback create teams that rank in the top 23% of engagement.

It’s not fair to deprive your team of information they need to grow. When you reframe conflict as a healthy, normative part of leadership, it loosens the anticipatory anxiety you may feel broaching difficult topics with others. Next time you have to give feedback, take a deep breath and remember, you’re not causing a conflict, you’re guiding your people toward growth. You’re not criticizing; you’re nurturing. And you’re certainly not being a villain; you’re being the leader they need.

## **Anticipate eventualities.**

Fear of the unknown or wondering how the recipient will react can hold many leaders back from ever speaking up. What if your direct report becomes defensive and lashes out at you? What if they start crying?

You can calm your anxiety and handle uncertainty using the worst case/best case/most likely tool. Consider the worst that could happen. If your employee cries, for example, how would you handle it? Perhaps you’d take a time out. Then consider the best that could possibly happen to foster more optimism. Finally, consider what is most likely, which is usually somewhere between the two extremes.

### **Start strong.**

You can also ease your whirlwind of thoughts by planning your opening. Being in control from the get-go can provide a confidence boost and allows you to set a respectful tone for the conversation. Once Filip realized he needed to tackle the situation with Angelique head on, he approached her and said: “I appreciate your dedication and creativity. Something I wanted to talk about is a pattern of low morale, and I want to understand if there are any obstacles that we can address together.”

Using “I” statements whenever possible helps ensure you communicate directly without vacillating or minimizing your concerns simply because you’re scared. Being specific is also important. Rather than saying, “You dropped the ball again,” try saying, “I’m concerned that I didn’t get the documents in time for the client meeting today.”

### **Make feedback part of the process.**

Feedback should be a regular ritual, not an occasional blast. Making feedback a habit ensures the tiny annoyances and frustrations you harbor don’t blow up into major conflicts. Plus, gradually exposing yourself to fearful situations is the best way to overcome them. The more you practice giving feedback in lower-stakes, everyday scenarios as part of your role, the better at it you’ll become.

A great way to systematize feedback is through regular one-on-ones with your team. You can also schedule project debriefs where team members can reflect, or pre-mortems where people can discuss in advance any risks, potential problems, and flesh out how they’ll work with one another.

Creating a positive feedback culture will give you opportunities to flex your newfound assertiveness skills while also strengthening rapport and

trust with your team. And that, as a leader, is one of the best things you can hope for.

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