

This handout is modified from one created by Bruce Hamilton in May 2000 for teachers of English and Scottish dancing. Feedback welcome!

Background:

The usual, unspoken setup for an observer giving feedback to a teacher is something like the following:

- The teacher is expected to give a flawless performance.
- The observer wants to make the teacher's performance better suit the observer's taste.
- The observer therefore notes any imperfections or shortcomings, and brings them to the attention of the teacher.
- If the teacher had reasons for doing what she did, or is simply feeling defensive, the teacher may defend herself to the observer.
- The observer may disagree, in which case the process repeats.
- If the teacher complains about the feedback, the observer takes that as defensiveness on the part of the teacher.

The teacher can't win this game, and the observer can't lose. The teacher therefore feels defensive, and has a hard time hearing the feedback, let alone learning from it. There is little incentive for the observer to make the feedback useful, and no process at all for the observer to improve the quality of the feedback.

About these notes:

We attempt to reduce the teacher's feelings of defensiveness (so that the feedback can sink in), and to improve the usefulness of the observer's feedback (so that the teacher can learn from it). We can't control the actual setup and assumptions, but we can constrain the teacher and observer to act *as if* the setup were this:

- The teacher has asked the observer to note (certain aspects of) the performance.
- The observer is acting like a video camera, not a customer to be satisfied.
- The teacher is the one who will decide whether any changes are desired, and in what direction.
- Since there are no accusations or complaints being delivered, there is no need for defense or explanation.

Again, in doing this we have two goals:

- Tune the feedback for maximum information and minimum “should” content.
- Alter the setup so that the observer has no power over the teacher.

Here are the guidelines:

Good feedback is:

- *Factual:* Don’t say, “that was good,” “you should have told them when the denominator is zero,” or “everyone got confused in the second half.” Do say, “I enjoyed X,” “Some students didn’t realize they had to be careful where the denominator vanishes,” or “the group I observed got lost simplifying the rational expression.”
- *Specific:* Don’t say, “that was good,” or “your instructions were unclear.” Do say, “you clarified the vanishing denominator issue clearly and succinctly,” or “students were unsure whether to multiply or divide top and bottom by two.”
- *Balanced:* List equally things that you think need changing, things you think are great, and things that are just interesting (like “four of your students wore mismatched socks”).
- *Useful:* Don’t say: “you’re too short,” or “I was feeling grumpy today.” Do say, “I couldn’t see you from the back,” or “I needed a bathroom break about 15 minutes before we finally took one.”

Some tendencies you may need to fight:

- Repeating the feedback until you get the reaction you want. This is self-serving. Give the feedback, don’t wish for anything in return, and give the initiative back to the teacher.
- Noticing only things that need “fixing,” or only things you know how to “fix.” You are not the one who will choose what to change and what to keep, and you are not the one who will be making the changes. Give as much information as you can.
- Solving the “problem” for the teacher. Let them decide whether it’s really a problem and whether it’s worth solving. Even if it is, give the teacher credit for being able to solve it. Help if (and only if) they ask.
- Telling only what someone wants to hear. It’s more useful to give all the information (or, if time is tight, a balanced selection).
- Softening the feedback with phrases like, “I know you’re tired, but...” or “since the fan was going, your voice seemed a little soft, though I know you can project when you want to, and...” Ultimately, that’s patronizing and not as useful as, “I could barely hear you.” Keep your feedback crisp.

Receiving feedback:

- You get to say what kind of feedback you want and on what subjects. You can say you don't want any feedback. You can ask your friends to notice details of what you do or to notice their general feelings about your presentation. You can tell them you're working, say, your boardwork, and to ignore other things.
- You get to say, "stop—I've got all I can handle right now."
- Be sure you understand the feedback. Ask questions if necessary: "What effect did it have when I did that?" "Can you be more specific?" "Do you remember exactly what I was doing then?" "Was there anything you liked?" What, exactly? Remember, though that your aim is to *understand*, not to agree or disagree.
- When you understand the feedback, give the observer a sincere "Thank you" . . .
- . . . and stop there. Change the subject, talk to someone else, or walk away. Resist the temptation to explain, defend yourself, etc. You have both worked hard to make the discussion a one-way transfer of information—keep it that way.