



Giving Tough Feedback Virtually

Whether our organizations are fully virtual, hybrid, or back to the office full time, we all have to interact with our colleagues and organizational stakeholders via Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Webex or another virtual platform. And even though we've tried so hard to encourage meaningful virtual connection, online meetings make informal or spontaneous check ins and reading body language or emotional reactions more challenging. Even though we don't want to, it's likely that, at least occasionally, we need to give tough or corrective feedback in online meetings. In a time when more people are feeling stressed, burnt out, and challenged to balance their personal and professional roles, knowing how to give effective and empathetic feedback in a virtual environment is crucial. The strategies below can help you frame your feedback when you're online.

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- 1. Provide a lot of positive feedback, very regularly.** If you're primarily offering critical feedback or giving input on how practices, actions, priorities need to change, improve, etc. it's likely that you'll quickly see engagement in virtual meetings dip. If you want to get better at providing challenging or constructive feedback virtually, make sure you're being really intentional about offering positive feedback that is specific, evidence-based, and connected to outcomes and impact almost daily.
- 2. Use strengths-based approaches, even when you want someone to change their behavior.** Start with what people do well, then discuss with them how they can apply the skills, knowledge, passion, and experiences that drive their strengths to areas of need. When you recognize what people already bring to the table, they are more willing to learn and grow.
- 3. Be curious and start the meeting with questions.** When you ask someone how they think things are going, it's likely they will already know what the issues are and why they are happening. This can make your job much easier because you can quickly shift the conversation to understanding what support they need rather than what they're not doing well. In instances when someone does not know that there is an issue, asking questions first helps you understand their perspectives and interpretation of expectations.
- 4. Share your intent for the meeting early in the discussion.** Let people know that your goal is to help and not shame to ease some concern from the start. You can say things like, 'I don't want to focus on what's going wrong, I want to focus on what we can do going forward'. Or 'my hope is that by the end of this meeting, you have a better understanding of our expectations and I have a better understanding of the support you need to be successful.'
- 5. Stick to the facts.** It's easy to assume you know why someone's productivity has suddenly dipped, but that speculation is not helpful when giving feedback. When you are providing tough feedback, focus on specific, evidence-based examples and concrete solutions. 'When you do X, it impacts the team in this way...' 'Instead of Y, please do Z'. If people want to share more context, you can provide that opening; but you want the main takeaway of the meeting to focus on expectations and concrete steps moving forward. It's often helpful to ask people to share their takeaways from the meeting to ensure you're on the same page.
- 6. Recognize that we are in an ongoing high-stress era.** Be empathetic to feelings or reactions that come up and make sure people have needed time or resources to work through your feedback. You may offer to end a meeting early, schedule time to follow up, or have an 'off camera' chat to ease the stress or give the person time to process.