
Giving Negative Feedback Across Cultures



By Erin Meyer, INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Managers in different parts of the world are conditioned to give feedback in drastically different ways. Understanding why can help you critique more effectively.

In 1982, a British Airways plane flew through a cloud of volcanic ash over Indonesia and lost power to its engines. The British pilot, Eric Moody, calmly informed the passengers: “Good evening again ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain here. We have a small problem in that all four engines have failed. We’re doing our utmost to get them going and I trust you’re not in too much distress and would the chief steward please come to the flight deck.”

Fortunately, the plane was able to glide far enough and make a safe landing at a nearby airport. Moody’s announcement has since been widely hailed as a classic example of British understatement and it demonstrates one of the ways the British commonly give negative feedback. More direct cultures use what linguists call “upgraders”, words preceding or following negative feedback that makes it feel stronger, such as “absolutely” or “totally”.

By contrast, more indirect cultures, such as the British, use more “downgraders”, words that soften the criticism, such as “kind of”, “sort of” and “a little bit”.

No laughing matter

But this can create confusion with people from other cultures. Marcus Klopfer, a German finance director, learned the hard way. A soft-spoken manager in his forties, Klopfer described how his failure to decode a message from his British boss almost cost him his job.

“In Germany, we typically use strong words when giving negative feedback or criticising in order to make sure the message registers clearly. During a one-on-one, my British boss “suggested that I think about” doing something differently. So I took his suggestion. I thought about it and decided not to do it. Little did I know that his phrase was supposed to be interpreted as, “change your behaviour right away or else”. And I can tell you, I was pretty surprised when he called me into his office to chew me out for insubordination.”

Klopfer subsequently learned to analyse messages by ignoring the downgraders and focusing his attention on the raw message in the middle. He also considered how his British staff might interpret his messages, which he had been delivering without any softeners at all. Now Klopfer makes an effort to soften the message when giving negative feedback to British counterparts. “I try to start by sprinkling the ground with a few light positive comments and words of appreciation. Then I ease into the feedback with “a few small suggestions,” he said.

It’s possible to be too honest

Should Klopfer’s boss have adapted his style to be more direct in order to assure his German team member received the message clearly? There is one rule for working with cultures that are more direct than yours: don’t try to do it like them. Even in direct cultures, it is possible to be too direct and if you try to switch to their style you risk making things worse.

Kwang Young-Su, a Korean manager who had been working in the Netherlands for six years, made this mistake. Young-Su explained; “The Dutch culture is very direct, and we Koreans do not like to give direct negative feedback. So when I first came to the Netherlands, I was shocked at

how rude and arrogant the Dutch are with their criticism. When they don't like something, they tell you bluntly to your face. I spoke to another Korean friend who has been in the Netherlands for a while, and he told me that the only way to handle this is to give it right back to them. Now I try to be just as blunt with them as they are with me." Kwang's Dutch colleagues later complained that they found him so aggressive and angry that they were practically unable to work with him.

Mixing the positive with the negative

When giving negative feedback consider not only how many upgraders or downgraders you are using, but also whether to wrap positive feedback around negative feedback. Although Americans are stereotyped around the world for their directness, if you give negative feedback in the U.S. by launching into the criticism (as would be common in countries like Russia), you may find that your American counterpart is anything but receptive. You'll have better luck if you explicitly state something that you appreciate about the person or the situation before moving onto what you'd like that person to do differently. In addition, try over time to be balanced in the amount of positive and negative feedback you give. If you notice something positive your colleague has done, say it there and then, with explicit appreciation. Then, if you need to criticise them later, your comments are more likely to be heard and considered rather than rejected out-of-hand.

Above all, think about the norms of the culture you are working with, and consider how that might impact the way your criticism is received. Reactions and preferred styles differ dramatically from one society to another. The Thai manager has been taught never to criticise a colleague openly or in front of others, while the Dutch manager has learned always to be honest and to give the message straight. Americans are trained to wrap positive messages around negative ones, while the French are used to criticising passionately and providing positive feedback sparingly.

With a little focus and practice, you can learn to adapt your style to numerous world cultures and get the results you are hoping for.

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