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# The Pitfalls of Giving Feedback Across Cultures



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD

**A direct approach that's welcomed at home can be easily misinterpreted as aggressive elsewhere.**

In some ways, feedback is a little like networking. We all know it's good and necessary, but most people feel somewhat awkward about it. Indeed, as the workplace becomes increasingly diverse, some care is needed, as norms and expectations can vary wildly.

Overall, most employees recognise the benefits of frank and honest feedback. For instance, in a 2019 [survey](#) by Zenger Folkman, 94 percent of 2,700 respondents said they believed feedback allowed them to improve when done right.

Problems can arise when feedback collides with a ubiquitous trend in business: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Bolstered by the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, DEI is among the top priorities of organisations today. At first glance, DEI does seem compatible with a culture of honest feedback. When properly harnessed, diverse voices can give firms an edge in an ever more complex world.

The challenge is that diversity often makes sharing feedback more complicated. Feedback delivered poorly – in the eyes of the recipient – can backfire. It can promote bad feelings and defensiveness, not to mention rupture relationships. For people to receive criticism well, they must first feel safe with the person providing it.

### **Feedback triggers alarm bells in the brain**

I ran an experiment with more than 3,000 executives who were my students at INSEAD. Presented with a hypothetical situation, 90 percent of them claimed that they would immediately give clear feedback to a colleague who had made mistakes during a sales presentation.

This result was consistent across industries, genders, cultural backgrounds and job levels. Surprised, I began asking a follow-up question: “What about your teammates? Would they provide the feedback?” As you can guess, most participants admitted that their colleagues would be unlikely to do so.

“Isn’t it interesting that only those rare people who would provide the feedback participate in my sessions?” I teased. While most managers claim they’d give the feedback, in real life they don’t.

The issue is that giving feedback triggers a conflict in people’s brains between the frontal cortex and the amygdala. The cortex, the most logical part of the brain, loves candid feedback. But the brain’s most primitive part, the amygdala, really doesn’t.

The challenge with feedback, therefore, is to make sure that your delivery succeeds in helping the rational cortex override the angsty amygdala. This is not easy, and diversity in the workplace, in fact, increases the likelihood of feedback being perceived as hostile.

Of course, diversity at work today encompasses many types of differences, such as cultures, genders and generations. In this article, I will explain how people can improve how they deliver feedback across cultures.

### **Constructive intention is easily misinterpreted**

When working with people from a wide variety of cultures and countries, the risk of upsetting someone when giving feedback is high. That’s because what’s considered constructive feedback in one culture can be perceived as destructive in another.

For example, American culture is often stereotyped as exceedingly direct. In some aspects, it's true. Americans tend to value clear, simple communication. They also like recapping key points and confirming decisions in writing. However, the story changes when it comes to giving negative feedback.

In those situations, most Americans will try to preserve the self-esteem of the person receiving the feedback. They may then give three positives for every negative and use superlatives to accentuate the positive, even when the negative is the key point. ("Overall it was excellent. To this part you might want to make some small tweaks.")

However, wrapping positives around a negative is downright confusing for people in countries where managers are much more likely to tell it like it is. I'm referring to the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Israel, Russia and France - where I live - to name a few.

Take Olga, a Ukrainian human resources (HR) executive, who told me, "We don't perceive it as demotivating or unkind to say to a colleague, 'This is not OK,' or 'This behaviour must change.' We don't talk about what we liked and appreciated before getting to the point."

Olga was in for a rude awakening when she moved from Ukraine to the United States. In her new job, she faced a colleague, Cathy, who made payroll mistakes every month. Privately, Olga told her, "This absolutely cannot continue. Your mistakes are creating big headaches."

Later, when another manager emailed Olga to complain that Cathy had got the amounts wrong yet again, Olga responded that it was completely unacceptable and copied Cathy in the email so that she could benefit from seeing the whole thread. To Olga's surprise, her own boss stopped by to explain none of this was okay. As it turned out, Cathy had been so upset, she had asked to change jobs.

## **When in Rome**

The case of Jethro, an American working in Silicon Valley, is also enlightening. Jethro is soft-spoken, but forthright. After he gave feedback (by video) to co-workers in Thailand, HR in Bangkok complained that he was bullying his Thai colleagues.

According to the head of HR in Thailand, the American tendency to state the area in need of improvement already feels aggressive to a Thai. She added that Americans' habit of recapping key points in writing "makes us feel that you don't trust us to do as we say or are trying to get us in trouble".

It would have been more effective if, instead, Jethro had clearly praised what was good and left out what was bad. For example, about a presentation he'd just seen, he might say, "I especially liked the examples you gave in the presentation last week." To a Thai colleague, this would clearly mean that the examples from this morning's presentation were lacking.

The main advice in such intercultural situations is to listen carefully to the usual manners of speech of your counterparts. This can allow you to gauge how direct you can be when giving feedback.

For instance, when voicing criticisms, people from more direct cultures tend to use reinforcing adverbs, as in "This is absolutely inappropriate". By contrast, more indirect cultures often use words that soften the criticism, such as "kind of", "a little" and "maybe". They may also use deliberate understatements, such as "This is just my opinion", when they really mean "This is obvious to everyone."

While some caution is warranted in terms of how feedback is delivered, managers shouldn't shy away from giving it. When done right, feedback can truly be a gift to individuals and organisations.

*This is part 1 of a three-part series on the art of giving feedback in the age of DEI.*

*This is an adaptation of an [article](#) published in the Harvard Business Review.*

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