Constructive Feedback Across Cultures

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I recently received some negative feedback from someone that shook me by the aggressive and public nature in which it was delivered. When I later, privately, pointed out to the person that providing constructive feedback confidentially would have perhaps been more productive, the individual in question offered that she had approached the feedback in a very European way that invited debate.

Giving feedback in a culturally sensitive manner is always a tricky situation that can easily cause misunderstanding and hard feelings. In indirect cultures, such as many East Asian societies, maintaining harmony is critical to fostering empathic relationships. Since giving face is paramount, people tread lightly, using a roundabout means to provide feedback (often non-verbally) or engaging a third party intermediary.

In the U.S. where the need to be liked drives many Americans' behavior, feedback is often cushioned using the "sandwich" approach whereby positive feedback is first provided, followed by the suggested need for improvement (often done indirectly) and finally completed with words of encouragement. While this approach might reinforce the personal development that is core to many Americans, it can also be perceived as weak and insincere by cultures that prefer a more straightforward approach.

So with so many different communication styles, how can one provide feedback in a culturally sensitive manner? While there is not a one-size fits all approach, there are nonetheless some tips that may be useful when giving feedback to someone from your own or another culture. *Click here for tips.*

1) Be sure to pause prior to giving feedback, particularly if you are experiencing strong emotions. Feedback that is relayed in anger or frustration is rarely presented in a productive way and instead may come off as blaming or shaming the other.
2) Start by asking your counterpart how he or she felt about the situation. Getting them to share their perspective allows you to assess if you have similar views on the matter. It also allows you to openly suggest that you may have seen the situation from a different perspective inviting them to solicit your views.
3) Beware of making comments that will put your counterpart on the defensive. Instead, explain what you observed and how you felt about it. Keep in mind that making yourself vulnerable goes a long way to fostering empathic relationships.
4) Be sure to focus on the behavior, not the personality of the individual. This is critical to deflect any possible sense of being attacked that may cause the person to shut down and harbor negative or retaliatory feelings.

5) Instead of telling your counterpart that he or she did a poor job and what could be done to improve it, ask how he or she thinks it could have been done better, requesting specific examples.
6) Never provide negative feedback in a public environment that may cause shame, embarrassment and distrust. Pulling the person aside and engaging in a constructive dialogue about the issue by demonstrating your desire to help will encourage a more honest conversation.

When trust is lost due to inappropriate delivery of feedback, it is often difficult to rebound and takes a long time to rebuild it. In fact, research has shown that it takes 17 positive messages to reverse one negative message. Given that communication is already challenging enough in cross-cultural settings, understanding how different cultures approach feedback may be just the antidote to avoiding hurt feelings, loss of trust and potential damage to the relationship.