



Ancient Wisdom for Today's Feedback
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Recently, I was reading a manuscript that dates back more than 2,000 years, and I noticed that the wisdom captured there could be applied by organizational leaders to the process of giving feedback.

More on that in a moment, but, first, what is feedback? The English Oxford Living Dictionary defines it as: “Information about reactions to a product, a person’s performance of a task, etc. *which is used as a basis for improvement.*” In the organizations where I provide executive coaching and leadership development training, feedback is used primarily as information and perspective on an individual’s performance in aspects of their work.

I believe that feedback is a gift of someone’s time and energy, even though—like me—you may have experienced feedback in the past that has seemed to be anything but a gift at the time! Often, feedback is poorly done, so that it feels more like an inquisition, an assault, or an attempt to keep you in check. It is one of the most frequently used vocabulary words in organizations today, and it usually begins with the words, “Can I give you some feedback?” to which the only acceptable answer is, “Yes, sure.”

This article will give you useful tips on how to provide good, helpful feedback intended as the basis for improvement. First, I’d like to share a story from my past, when I learned that feedback is a gift, and that I needed to care enough about people to give them my feedback.

About 25 years ago, I was part of a panel that spoke to a group of HR professionals in New York City on a topic related to career development. On the panel sat a Human Resources VP, the head of another consulting company, and me as an outside consultant. This consulting company president immediately annoyed me when he arrived breathless—shortly before the event began—and told the rest of the panel that he needed to go first, because he had another important engagement to attend. So, from the beginning, it was clear that he had something more important to do and he did not intend to stick around to hear what his fellow panel members had to offer.

Then, just moments before he was to speak, he popped off to the men’s room. He came back and turned toward the room filled with HR professionals to address them. As he made this turn, I was seated slightly behind him and noticed that his suit coat was tucked into the back of his pants, making him look like an idiot. He was unaware of it, however, and the audience was also unaware of it as he faced them about to speak. I sat there silent for a moment and asked myself if I should tell him about his suit coat being tucked into his pants. In that moment, I decided that I didn’t care enough about him to give him the gift of feedback. He launched into his part of the talk, often turning his back to the group as he went through his slide deck. I knew it would be sometime later, when he was at his next, more important meeting, that he would notice the way he was dressed. I smiled with a bit of evil satisfaction thinking of that moment.

As I said, feedback is a gift of time and energy designed to help someone improve. In order to be the kind of leader who gives effective, consistent feedback. Here's where the ancient wisdom comes in:

Genuinely care. When you decide you will give people feedback, make sure that you are genuinely interested in their improvement. If you are threatened by them in some way, if you are jealous of their abilities or successes, or if you just don't like them for some reason, you will not give feedback that is helpful. Particularly if you are feeling critical or judgmental about them, your feedback will not be effective. Further, if they feel judged by you due to the tone and content of your feedback, they will evaluate you as unfair and overly critical, and they will convince themselves that your feedback is designed to harm them rather than help. Make sure you do have their best interests in mind.

Clean up your own act. Over the years as a coach, I've heard my coaching clients complain about bosses or peers who gave them feedback about something, when these people were actually worse at it than my clients. For example, if you struggle with listening deeply to others when they share their thoughts and feelings at work, make sure you bring your skills up to at least adequate before you start to give advice and counsel to others about listening. Or, if you tend to swing from passive to aggressive in your approach to conflict situations, shore up these conflict resolution skills in yourself before you coach someone on being respectfully assertive.

Carefully choose the timing. Even the best feedback, from a foundation of genuine caring and personal skill in the area of coaching, will fall flat if the person is not ready to receive it. So that you are not wasting your breath—and annoying the other person—choose your timing carefully. Tee it up in advance by giving the person a 'heads up' about the topic about which you want to provide feedback. Ask them to think about their skill level in the area before your meeting. If they become visibly upset during the first part of your feedback, reschedule the meeting for a later time and ask them to think about the topic again beforehand.

The origin of this ancient wisdom. These three aspects of effective feedback come from the ancient wisdom of the Bible. In Matthew 7, verses one through six, Jesus said, "judge not that you be judged", "take the plank out of your own eye", and "don't cast your pearls before swine". These three admonitions, it turns out, provide the basis for highly effective feedback in which you genuinely care, clean up your own act first, and carefully choose the timing. In addition, you should:

Be specific in your observations, suggestions. Vague suggestions and unclear observations from your perspective will only serve to obfuscate the situation. Focus your observations on the specific behaviors you have observed on which you want to provide feedback. What have you seen them do, or read from them in emails that you think could be improved? Stay away from interpreting the underlying psychological reasons for their behavior or impugning their motives. Just state the facts, and then share your response—thoughts or feelings—to those facts.

Follow up to ensure understanding. When delivering the feedback, you might make the mistake of assuming people understood what you said. I've often heard coaching clients say, "oh, I'm sure they understood me—I was very clear in my feedback and concern." However, unless you ask people what they understood you to say, you don't actually know if what you intended to say was what they interpreted from your words. So, follow up with them later to ask what they walked away with from the feedback; if it's not what you intended, clarify further and check again for understanding.