

Conversations that count

As George Bernard Shaw wryly observed: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." We believe that by delivering a candid message we have done what is necessary, when in reality we may have missed the deeper, underlying issues. The third component, in our series of articles on highly effective relationships, after understanding the context and building trust is having two-way conversations that count. They are vehicles of discovery, that either enrich understanding or if badly handled lead us into pot-holed cul de sacs.



When we change the dynamic in our organisations/personal lives from a feedback-giving to a [feedback-seeking culture](#), we automatically overcome one of the biggest communication obstacles. The responsibility to hear and act on feedback ultimately sits with the feedback receiver. If they request it, they are more in control because they choose when and from whom they receive the feedback. What is said to them is still outside their control, but the likelihood they will be receptive is heightened. When we default to the typical feedback-giving cycle it is wrought with anxiety as the feedback provider must bravely address the person, and hope they do something with it. The obvious downside of feedback seeking is that people may cherry pick whom they seek feedback from, and thus lose out on valuable growth opportunities. Naturally managers should address this if it becomes the norm.

Seeking feedback has been shown to [benefit people](#) in numerous ways : faster adaption to a new role, higher performance ratings, greater job satisfaction, increased creativity, and lower staff turnover. In our personal lives it is a key predictor of a healthy, stable marriage. So, if it's so good, why is it so hard? As Sheila Heen perceptively points out, we have two universal needs at odds with themselves: we want to learn and grow whilst at the same time wanting to be respected and accepted the way we are.

Learning to genuinely receive feedback and not be defensive requires maturity and a healthy self-regard. Paradoxically, people need to be both sensitive to the feedback and its implications, whilst being strong enough to not change everything about themselves.

The TRIBE approach for feedback receivers provides the structure to navigate these sometimes challenging feedback moments.

From being “feed smacked” to responding effectively to feedback using the TRIBE approach

Step	How it works	Practical action
<p>T=Trigger: acknowledge and label your trigger, identify its source, and label your emotion.</p>	<p>By labelling the emotion you dampen the amygdala response and create space to re-appraise. You activate the Pre-Frontal Cortex (PFC) which is your analytical part of the brain when analysing and recognising the emotion. Suppression/distraction are not useful techniques as they impede memory recall, health and it takes up valuable cognitive processing ability.</p>	<p>Apply the SCARF methodology to understand what rewards/threats you are experiencing. See Dr David Rock explanation of SCARF video.</p> <p>Breathe deeply and slowly.</p> <p>Remember this feedback does <u>not</u> need to be perceived as: permanent (we can change people's perception); pervasive (there are other areas we succeed in outside this situation); personalisation (whilst we may have contributed to this perception, there may be other factors like their hot buttons that drove this feedback.)</p>
<p>R=Reflect: on the biases (thinking traps and SCARF threats) impacting your perspective.</p>	<p>Enlist the PFC to override automated shortcuts that quickly measure and judge. It activates the default mode network, which allows you to look at your situation from a third person, neutral perspective.</p>	<p>Look at your inherent cognitive biases and see if you are falling into any of the following thinking traps: Jumping to conclusions, personalising, externalising, mind-reading, emotional reasoning, over-generalising, magnifying or minimising, and catastrophising.</p>
<p>I=Interpret: the situation from multiple perspectives.</p>	<p>It helps you respect differences and acknowledge needs of others by looking at it from their perspective.</p>	<p>You can rewrite the story and choose your interpretation via re-appraisal. “How could this new insight take me to the next level of my development/more successful?”</p>
<p>B=Build: bridges to the common goal.</p>	<p>By thinking about others (by placing yourself in their position) you stimulate the “in-group” vs “out-group” mentality.</p>	<p>Create psychological safety. See Prof Amy Edmondson video.</p> <p>Empathy: do role reversal, stand in their shoes.</p> <p>Exposure: regularly spend time in the company of people who think and behave differently to you.</p>
<p>E=Engage: in an open and honest SCARF (rewarding) approach that supports each other's psychological safety.</p>	<p>By using a common language (SCARF) we can appease the threat-based brain by seeing this person as “in-group”, and thereby being able to relate better to his/her perspective.</p>	<p>S= Status: “This is what I value about your contribution....”</p> <p>C=Certainty: “What do we want to achieve and by when?”</p> <p>A=Autonomy: “How can we help each other solve this issue.”</p> <p>R=Relatedness: “How can we ensure the relevant parties are included?”</p> <p>F=Fairness: “What are the objective, non-negotiable decision-making criteria we both agree to?”</p> <p>Ask open questions and look for examples. Just listen with intent to understand, stay detached as if it is being said about a third person.</p> <p>Apply NVC approach explained below.</p>

There will be times when we have to switch from feedback seeking to feedback giving mode, especially when people have blindspots. Dr. John Gottman, a relationship sage identified the “harsh start-up” as the most obvious predictor that a conversation would unravel e.g. If the discussion begins with sarcasm or some other negative form of communication (e.g. a criticism or expression of contempt). But please let's not resurrect the infamous sandwich feedback technique, where you layer a positive, then a negative, then a positive into a crucial conversation. Ultimately you end up with a very confused mixed message recipient. A powerful, yet simple technique developed by Dr Rosenberg is the [Non-Violent Communication](#) (NVC) approach. It works equally well in personal and work contexts.

When having difficult conversations, it is important to be extremely concise. Aim to describe your observations, feelings, needs, and requests in fewer than 40 words. Being verbose suggests you are justifying your needs, and that decreases their power. The format looks like this:

“When ...(observation), I feel(emotion) because I am needing some.....(universal need). Would you be able to...(request)?”

Crafting a succinct 40-word start-up requires patient, deliberate thought. But the result is clear, concise, and powerful. It provides insights into what you have observed, how you feel, and what needs are not being met. And at the end, you make an actionable request. Where the conversation goes from there is out of your hands, but you have created a non-confrontational start-up that maximises the potential for a positive outcome. Let's unpack each component..

1. Move from evaluations to observations

Most observations fall into two categories: what you heard (i.e. direct quotes), and what you saw (i.e. visible behaviours).

Our brains are hardwired to take raw information and rapidly create simple stories to explain them, good or bad, right or wrong, hero or villain. These stories are evaluations, and they are very hard to separate from observations. Here are a few examples to illustrate the difference:

Move from evaluations to observations

Evaluation: "You are lazy." (Which is a character attack).	Observation: "You said that you'd send the document last week, and I haven't received it."
Evaluation: "Your work is sloppy" (Which is a criticism).	Observation: "Three of the numbers in the report were inaccurate."
Evaluation: "You're always late!" (Which is a generalization).	Observation: "You arrived 10 minutes late to the meeting this morning."
Evaluation: "You ignored me." (Which implies intent).	Observation: "I sent you two emails, and I haven't received a response."

An easy way to check whether you've made an observation, or an evaluation is to ask yourself, "What did I actually see or hear?"

By focussing on the facts of the situation and not character/intentions we lower the likelihood for unhealthy debate.

2. Move from thoughts to feelings

The typical reaction to talking about feelings is that they don't add value and/or distract us from the real issue of problem-solving. But being aware of and communicating our [emotions](#) can have a powerful effect on other people through shared understanding. We cannot expect people to be accurate mind-readers. Emotions are less debatable as they are ours, whereas thoughts can easily devolve into point scoring debates.

Move from thoughts to feelings

Thought: "I feel that you aren't taking this seriously."	Emotion: "I feel frustrated."
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If you can substitute "I feel" with "I think" and the phrase still works—it's a thought, not an emotion. Sharing your thoughts in difficult conversations can get you into trouble, especially if the other person disagrees and wants to "correct" you.

A few emotions require extra attention and curiosity before sharing them. One is anger, which often masks more painful emotions like hurt and shame. It is important to figure out what's underneath the anger before having a difficult conversation, because when you are angry, you're more likely to speak impulsively.

3. Move from strategies to universal needs

Human beings have [universal needs](#) and behind every negative emotion lies an unmet universal need. For example, if a certain comment in a meeting left you feeling embarrassed, you might realize it was because your need for respect was not being met.

The pairing of emotions with universal needs has a transformative effect in difficult conversations as it builds a bridge between yourself and the other party. Common universal needs that surface a lot in difficult conversations are:

Autonomy	Collaboration	Consistency	Clarity
Integrity	Recognition	Respect	Reassurance
Support	Security	Understanding	

Once you uncover the universal need, it leads you to the final step in the start-up conversation, which is the request for a new approach going forward.

4. Move from demands to requests

What is the difference between a request and a demand? Both are strategies that would meet a need. Unlike demands, requests are invitations for another person to meet our needs, but only if it does not conflict with one of their needs. There will however be times when you will choose a demand over a request, when the behaviour is so destructive that it must stop immediately e.g. bullying.

Three principles can help you make clear requests:

1) Make it specific.	"I request that you be more respectful" is vague because what signals respect to you may not signal respect to someone else.	Spell out the concrete behaviours that would meet your need for respect, such as "I request that you arrive to meetings on time."
2) Say what you want, not what you don't want.	"I request that you don't dismiss other people's ideas straightaway" explains what you don't want, but it doesn't spell out what you do want.	Clarify the behaviours you want to see. For example, you can say, "I request that when a team member shares an idea, you ask two or three probing questions before sharing your conclusion."
3) Stay curious.	There are many ways to satisfy your underlying needs, but is there a way of satisfying everybody's needs? To maximize the chance of having both needs met, treat "no" as an invitation to explore the needs stopping someone from saying "yes."	

For deep relationships that last, we need to appreciate the inter-play between understanding the context, building trust and having conversations that count.

In closing, when we converse clearly, WHILST genuinely listening to the other party we move our conversations to the next level, where we can explore hidden, new vantagepoints. Reality does depend on where you are standing. Try it, you will be surprised by what you discover.

