Feedback Skills

No matter who we are or what job we do, there are always going to be times when we need to give feedback. This could be to a colleague, your manager, a customer or a supplier. To make sure the feedback is received in the right way, we need to make sure we give it effectively.

Feedback is a way of helping another person to consider changing his/her behaviour or actions. It is communication to a person (or a group), which gives that person information about how he/she affects others. Feedback helps an individual keep their behaviour "on target" in order to achieve goals. That means if the behaviour does not affect goals or targets, we have to question why we are giving the feedback. We need to ensure that we have an objective reason for giving the feedback, how is it going to help you and the other person concerned, without the reason, feedback will not be received in the right way.

Some criteria for useful feedback:

- It should be descriptive rather than evaluative. By describing our own reaction, it leaves the individual free to use it or not to use it as he sees fit. By avoiding evaluative language, it reduces the need of the individual to react defensively e.g. "I felt you ignored what he said".

- It should be specific rather than general. To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "just now when we were deciding the issue you did not listen to what others said and I felt forced to accept your arguments or face attack from you".

- It takes into account the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end e.g. "I think I understand it better after your explanation".

- It should be towards behaviour which the receiver can do something about. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which he has no control. If we know that the behaviour is a personality trait of the individual, how are they going to be able to do something about the behaviour?

- It is more useful when solicited than when imposed. It works more effectively when the receiver themselves has formulated the kind of question which those observing can answer.

- It should be well-timed. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behaviour, depending of course on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.

- It should be checked to ensure clear communication. One way of doing this is to ask the receiver to try and rephrase the feedback he has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.

- When the feedback is given in a training group, or work group, both giver and receiver have the opportunity to check with others in the group the accuracy of the feedback. Is this one person's impression or an impression shared by others?

- Feedback, then, is a way of giving help; it is a corrective mechanism for the individual who wants to learn how well their behaviour matches their intentions; and it is a way of helping an individual to establish their identity.

A Strategy

The idea here is that if we spend time thinking about our behaviour and what objectives are open to us, we are more likely to meet the needs of the situation than reacting to it 'off-the-cuff'.

Objective setting is therefore important. If done badly, the approach and objective may have to be dropped and new objectives hastily set while the situation is running. This will always happen from time to time but at least his thoughts will have been clarified as to the crucial elements of the situation and he is more likely to know why his original strategy is not producing the desired results.

From specified objectives, the aim is to produce a broad, strategic plan and then try to tie it down to the specific ways in which we want to behave in the situation.

- Decide the behaviours to use.

- Have ready an alternative plan of behaviour.

- Action the Plan

- Review the outcome.

- The final step is concerned with evaluating the extent to which:

- The behaviour was appropriate and specified;

- How well the objectives were achieved.

- How closely the plan was followed.