

What kind of feedback do you give?

Constructive or destructive?

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Providing someone with feedback is valuable. In our roles as educators, whether facilitator, leader, teacher, or a combination of all, we leave ourselves open to opinion. From time to time this feedback is shared constructively, points are collaboratively established to be worked through and targets are set. The outcome? Positive change. And then there are other times when feedback or criticism is destructive.

“The difference between constructive criticism and destructive criticism is the way in which comments are delivered. Although both forms are challenging your ideas, character, or ability, when someone is giving destructive criticism it can hurt your pride and have negative effects on your self-esteem and confidence. Destructive criticism is often just thoughtlessness by another person, but it can also be deliberately malicious and hurtful. Destructive criticism can, in some cases, lead to anger and/or aggression.” (Dealing With Criticism)



For those of you who have been on the receiving end of destructive criticism, I truly empathise. We stand in front of our peers or learners, delivering, teaching, or supporting with passion. From personal experience, I have been astounded by how hard some comments have hit me. It hurts! It can be completely unexpected and feels almost impossible to prepare for.

What troubles me most is the long-term damage that destructive criticism can cause. Whether motivated by a sense of helping, or, in rare cases, actively designed to cause turmoil, in the education sector it simply isn't good enough. Our roles and much of our professional development relies heavily on the feedback of peers. Education remains an intriguing mystery at times as I watch amazing middle leaders deliver well-constructed feedback for their students, personalising comments, and finding deeper meaning, while the same is not done for their peers.

HOW COULD YOU FRAME FEEDBACK?

In 2004, Emily Heaphy and Marcial Losada conducted a study of the nature and ratio of effective feedback. Although their data has now been widely reviewed and challenged on a statistical level (not on a wider interpretation of impact level), the basic premise of their findings is well worth understanding. They found, “The average ratio for the highest-performing teams was 5.6 (that is, nearly six positive comments for every negative one).” (Zenger and Folkman 2013). Taking the meaning into account over the data as a fact,

this leads us to believe that we perform better when the ratio of positive comments is much greater than negative. This in itself is not a revelation. A happy team who feel supported and trust their leadership will perform more effectively and cohesively than a team who feels the opposite — it's human nature. However, seeing this ratio made me reflect on the feedback I had given to a peer when reading through their sabbatical report recently.

I'm in no way suggesting these elements are missing. There are genuine bits of GOLD in this and statements that could turn into reflective blog posts all on their own. Your honesty is valuable- letting go, admitting to your scepticism and mentioning your 'obsession' with teaching the basics gives a 'real' feel to this rather than slightly disconnected academic feel we can get from some research and reports.

My opening line is an attempt to reassure the writer after some challenging questions prior to this paragraph.

Four pieces of strength or positives found in the writing. This potentially puts me at around a 4:1 ratio.

In no way am I suggesting my feedback here is perfect — far from it! Prior to this paragraph was a list of wider thinking questions that were designed to start deeper conversations, but upon rereading, I realised quickly that they could be seen as highly critical. After some rephrasing, but without losing the direction and with the addition of positivity to balance the challenge, I sent the feedback. It was well received and acted upon. I think the key here was to understand what it might feel like to be on the end of the email before pressing the send button. This is not always easy, but brings us back to the old proverb, 'treat others as you would wish to be treated.' It's not perfect, but I don't know anyone who would want to be on the end of destructive criticism!

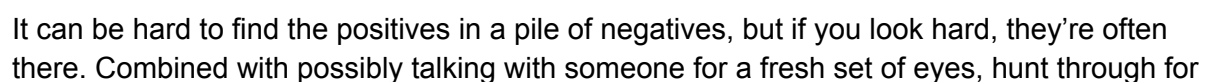
WHEN SHOULD YOU DELIVER FEEDBACK?

So, what if you've carefully phrased the criticism, balanced positive and negative elements, but made sure the meaning and direction has been maintained. When do you send it? Think carefully here. Have you ever received a challenging email late at night or over the weekend? It could be argued that we need a level of self-control and don't need to check emails or messages in our personal time, but digital technology has changed things and we live in a predominantly ever-connected world. Switching off and demarcating non-message/email time is a whole different conversation. In this instance, imagine receiving something constructive over the weekend. It could go either way, right? Gently nagging at you throughout the weekend and distracting from time with whānau and friends. Or, it could be well received and not worry you until Monday morning. But dare we assume? I think, perhaps, the biggest question to ask here is: can it wait until the morning or Monday? If the answer is no, shouldn't it lead to asking, how the best way to share might be?

HOW SHOULD YOU DELIVER FEEDBACK?

To be effective, I believe you have to know the person on a personal level so that you know how they respond to different modes of communication and which they prefer. It's important to know that one of your colleagues likes bad news or challenges to be shared face to face, whereas another is happy to receive it via Snapchat. For some, being able to hear someone's tone on the telephone or read their expression and body language in person (or

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH CRITICISM?



anything that resembles a comment that could be a compliment. If one simply cannot be found, stop reading. Put it down. Return to step one.

Respond (at an appropriate time)

The key here is appropriate. A response doesn't mean a defence. It may be as simple as acknowledging the criticism and knowing when to cease the conversation. If the criticism is truly unjust and undeserved, mediation may be needed. Find an alternative perspective and have a comparison. Otherwise, let it go; the damage done from holding on to something you cannot change far outweighs anything else.

Find a different cup

A close colleague of mine, who recently supported me through my own challenge, shared how strange it was that we so often end up focusing on the negative. On a page of beautifully balanced constructive criticism, our eyes immediately search for the thing we know will upset us the most! It made me wonder how often we bank the comments that make us feel good. How do we keep the cup full in the background, so we know it's there to drink from when we need it? There is nothing arrogant about storing positivity to improve a sense of self. After all, we have a first-aid kit in the house, why not have one for the mind?

IN CONCLUSION...

In closing, something I think we all need to remember (including me as I write this) is that we are our own harshest critics. Whether that stems from the words of others or a deeply reflective sense of self, it's about what we do with the thinking and words we receive. Do we let them stoke the flames of a raging fire of insecurity? Or, are we able to let them pass by us like a cool breeze? The internationally renowned singer Adele once said, "I have insecurities of course, but I don't hang out with anyone who points them out."

References

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[James Hopkins](#)'s passion lies in Modern Learning Practice. He helped in the development and planning of N4L's Pond, being invited to participate in thinking and learning with other Pioneer Educators, as well as writing several pieces for N4L about Pond. James developed Learning Network New Zealand's app for both iOS and Android, incorporating interactivity and communication within the app to compliment the business model used by the company. He also developed the online community associated with #primedchatnz on Twitter. As a result, he has interviewed and worked with Tony Ryan, Graham Watts, and several others, connecting them to the Twitter community, and organising an online chat directly associated to 45min interviews broadcast via YouTube/Google Plus.