

Don't underestimate the value of giving feedback: New research shows people want to receive it

March 31 2022, by Pam Birtill



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Imagine you're talking to someone and they have a big green piece of something they ate for lunch in their teeth. Do you tell them? Whether you do might depend on who they are (you might be more likely to tell your best friend than a work colleague) and perhaps your own

personality too.

There's no doubt many of us avoid giving feedback. It can feel awkward to tell somebody they have something in their teeth, or elsewhere. In a recent [pilot study](#), less than 3% of people told a researcher they had a mark, such as chocolate or a lipstick smudge, on their face.

Beyond issues relating to a person's appearance, feedback more generally is vital for learning and growth. Students need feedback so they can improve their marks. [In workplaces](#), feedback from managers can improve performance. We also give feedback in our personal lives—when we tell our partner the curry they cooked was too hot, or tell our kids to be more polite.

So why are we sometimes reluctant to provide feedback elsewhere? We might feel embarrassed, or wary that the feedback could upset the person receiving it, or even harm our relationship with them.

The researchers who conducted the pilot study I mentioned above have hypothesized that another reason we may be reluctant to give feedback is that we don't realize how valuable it is to the person receiving it.

They decided to investigate this theory through a series of five experiments, involving close to 2,000 participants. Their results were [recently published](#) in the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

What they did

In the first experiment, the researchers asked participants to imagine either receiving or giving feedback in ten different workplace situations: for example if they or someone else had food stuck in their teeth, or there were typos in a presentation.

The researchers intentionally selected scenarios where feedback would help someone—things that could be rapidly fixed. They asked participants to rate on a scale of zero to ten how likely they would be to give feedback, or how much they would want to receive feedback in the scenario.

What they found was a giving-wanting gap: that is, the ratings people gave were generally higher when it came to their desire to receive feedback, compared to the likelihood of providing it to others.

In the second experiment, participants were asked to recall real-life situations in which they had received or given feedback, or had the opportunity to give feedback but hadn't done so. Again there was a difference in how much people wanted feedback and their willingness to provide it.

Of course, experiments asking people to imagine or remember particular scenarios can only get us so far. The third experiment took place in a lab and involved pairs of friends, roommates or romantic partners providing genuine feedback. For example, one told the other that they should be more present, or that they take too long to get ready.

While less than half of the feedback givers wanted to provide feedback when given a choice, 86% of people wanted to receive feedback, showing again the giving-wanting gap. Notably, the receivers rated the feedback as highly valuable.

In the fourth experiment, the researchers wanted to see if they could reduce this gap. The most effective method proved to be asking participants, based on having them recall an occasion where they could have provided feedback to someone else, to imagine receiving that feedback themselves. Would they want it?

Putting participants in the shoes of the feedback receiver significantly increased the likelihood that the feedback giver would recognize the need for and provide feedback. This suggests that our reluctance to give feedback has a lot to do with failing to appreciate its value.

The final experiment again involved pairs of people giving real feedback. This time, one member of the pair was practicing a speech for a competition, while the other was assigned to listen and provide comments. To make the feedback more consequential, a prize was given for the best speech.

At various points during this experiment, both givers and receivers were asked different questions about the desire for and value of feedback. Once again, the researchers found a giving-wanting gap.

What can we make of all this?

The strength of this study lies in the consistency of findings across a range of scenarios: imagined feedback, memories of real feedback, and feedback in a lab setting. It's clear that people generally want feedback—it's valuable to them and allows them to improve.

But this study does have some limitations. As the authors acknowledge, it doesn't consider the effects of power dynamics. For example, feedback from a senior manager to a junior colleague is going to be very different to feedback between friends. The study also doesn't consider how often feedback is given. A friend who is constantly telling you how to improve is likely to get annoying quickly.

And of course, not all feedback is welcome by all people all the time. While feedback was generally valued and wanted in this study, this wasn't true in every case. Further, participants giving real feedback in this study were doing so in an artificial setting.

Ultimately, we should still be careful about immediately diving in and telling anyone and everyone how they can improve. [Constructive feedback](#) should be specific, actionable, and delivered in a timely fashion. In many cases, asking someone if they would like your feedback can be a good start.

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