

How to get more honest feedback from your direct reports

Your team knows better than anyone what it's like to work for you. But that doesn't mean they're going to tell you. Many direct reports figure, *Why risk it?* or *What's the point?* They're cautious because they've heard about — or experienced — managers lashing out, stunting people's careers, or just plain ignoring them when they share what they really think.



"Let's say your potential boss asks you to communicate with him exclusively via his hand puppet proxy, Mr. Handsington. How would you handle that?"

But it doesn't have to be that way.

You can be a different kind of leader — one who understands that just about everything you do and say impacts your direct reports' lives and performance, who truly wants to hear their unvarnished feedback, and who proactively seeks out that feedback so that everyone can reach their potential, including you.

So how can you help your direct reports overcome their reluctance to level with you? Try these tips that focus on three key areas:

- Laying the groundwork for high-trust feedback exchanges
- Handling feedback asks and conversations with finesse and compassion
- Following up on feedback you receive

Laying the groundwork for high-trust feedback exchanges

1. Give feedback to your direct reports the way you want it given to you.

You can't expect your direct reports to provide honest, open, and helpful feedback if you don't provide it to them. It's a two-way street. So take care to model best feedback practices that signal trust, respect, and fairness.

You can do that by:

- **Using constructions like “I’ve noticed that when you do X, it has Y impact” and consistently focusing on specific behaviors.** Both of these tactics make it clear that you're pointing out the effects of their observable behaviors, not passing judgment on your direct reports as people.
- **Distributing feedback fairly across your team by meeting [feedback quotas you set and track for yourself](#)** (e.g., give three pieces of reinforcing feedback and one piece of redirecting feedback per person, per week). Fair managers are trusted managers. For more, see [9 ways to counter the unconscious biases holding you back](#).
- **Pairing your feedback with coaching and encouragement instead of just telling people what to do.** Helping your direct reports create a plan for responding to feedback increases the likelihood that they'll keep doing the things you appreciate — and stop doing the things you don't. It also signals you care and believe that learning is important. For more, see [When a direct report comes to you with a problem, start a coaching conversation](#).
- **Acknowledging how you may have contributed to performance missteps.** Assuming others are 100 percent at fault doesn't usually reflect reality — or foster trust. For more, see [Before giving redirecting feedback, consider how you may have contributed to the issue](#).

For more on best feedback practices, see our [Giving Feedback](#) topic.

2. Handle bad news, emotions, and conflicts with appreciation and grace.

You won't get honest feedback from your direct reports if they don't feel safe. And they won't feel safe if you react to the inevitable challenges of work life with cringes, frustration, or anger.

Instead, consciously shift your mindset by:

- **Thanking every direct report who shares bad news or criticism with you.** And meaning it. After all, wouldn't you rather know the truth about your team's perceptions than be clueless?
- **Responding to problems calmly.** Focus on how to improve the situation in the future, rather than getting hung up on blame and if-onlys.
- **Initiating and embracing difficult conversations instead of avoiding them.** In most people's minds, giving a manager honest feedback definitely qualifies as a difficult conversation. And if you've indicated that you prefer not to talk about anything uncomfortable, they won't go there.

3. Weave relatively safe feedback asks into your day-to-day exchanges.

Unless you already have a strong, trusting relationship with your direct reports, you likely won't get far bulldozing your way straight into a sensitive ask (e.g., "So, *how am I doing as a manager?*"). But most people, even new hires, will be comfortable and possibly even flattered if you initiate feedback exchanges over lower stakes topics related to the team's work. This will send a strong message that you care about — and rely on — your team's opinions.

Lower stakes topics depend on your team, but could include:

- Ideas for team events or rewards
- Team workflows and project processes
- Scheduling and timing (e.g., the length of team meetings or the day they fall on)
- Team software tools and how you use them (e.g., whether to try a new chat tool or change team email norms)
- Potential next projects and/or goals

4. For potentially sensitive topics, ask for feedback at least 24 hours ahead of time.

Don't put your direct reports on the spot — doing so heightens the perceived threat of leveling with you. Plus, you'll be more likely to get helpful feedback if you give people time to put some thought into it.

"Wei-Lin, I'm in the process of selecting a development goal to become a better manager and would really appreciate your honest input. In next week's 1-on-1, could you please share one example of a time you think I did something well as a manager and one example of a time I could have done better?"

Handling feedback asks and conversations with finesse and compassion

5. Frame feedback asks as requests for “advice” or “input.”

“Feedback” can be a loaded word — one that may cause warning bells to sound for your direct reports. So instead of trotting out a term that could imply “criticize me,” try using one that invites people to share their expertise.

“Maurice, I could use your advice on how to revise the third slide of my presentation. It covers the project you’ve been spearheading and I want to be sure I’ve described it effectively. Would you be willing to take a look?”

6. Be up front about why you’re asking.

Putting your direct reports in the awkward position of having to guess your motivations for requesting feedback will only increase any unease. Instead, proactively explain why you need their help.

“I’m working on becoming a more efficient meeting facilitator. After tomorrow’s meeting, would you be willing to share your thoughts about agenda items we spent too much time on and ones that seemed productive?”

7. Seed feedback conversations with examples of criticism you’ve received in the past.

Sharing examples of criticism you’ve received in the past signals that you understand you’re not perfect, and that they’re not likely to shock or hurt you with less-than-rosy assessments.

“I’m interested in improving as a manager and could use your honest input. For example, direct reports in the past have told me I can be unclear when I assign tasks. That was very helpful for me to hear, and it’s something I’m working on.”

Watch experienced manager [Grayson Morris](#) explain how he uses this tactic:

8. Forgive awkward deliveries — and don’t conflate them with the content of your direct reports’ feedback.

Most individual contributors don't receive much — if any — training on how to give feedback in the workplace and have few opportunities to practice. As a result, their delivery might come across as too blunt, too watered down, or otherwise unpolished.

Instead of letting this affect your evaluation of the feedback itself, remember that your direct reports are at a disadvantage in terms of the power dynamic between you and the likely gap in feedback-giving skill. Keep your body language open and encouraging — arms loose at your sides, expression friendly.

If you're the kind of person whose emotions can get away from you, it may help to roleplay with a friend or mentor before feedback sessions with your direct reports. In addition, see our article [4 ways to manage the emotions holding you back at work](#).

9. Listen intently and ask clarifying questions in a curious, open way.

Even if you feel like saying, “Are you kidding me?” or “Do you have any idea how hard my job is?” — don't. [Reacting defensively](#) is the No. 1 way never to get honest feedback from that person again.

Having an emotional response is normal, however, so you might need to work extra hard to follow what you're hearing with genuine curiosity. In addition to reminding yourself that [feedback often reveals more about the giver than the receiver](#), you might be able to maintain your calm and focus by asking clarifying questions.

Make sure you use a warm, gentle tone and that your questions aren't framed as excuses (e.g., “*So you don't think it's important to set high standards?*”). You don't want your direct report to feel interrogated. For example:

- Your direct report: “*Well, sometimes you can have kind of unreasonable expectations about deadlines.*”
- You: “*Thanks for being honest — that's really good to know. Could you share an example of a time I did that, so that I understand?*”

If you're having an emotional reaction or need some time to take it all in before you can ask questions, simply explain that you'll follow up later:

“Thank you for sharing that feedback, Ava. I’m going to give this some thought and will follow up with you in our next 1-on-1.”

For more, see [9 tips to listen like a leader](#).

Following up on feedback you receive

10. Tell your direct report what you intend to do with the feedback.

You have three options when a direct report shares feedback: take it, don't take it, or do some additional sleuthing to help you decide (e.g., ask your manager, peers, or other direct reports for their feedback on the same behavior).

Regardless, you owe it to the direct report who gave you the feedback to communicate your intentions — either in the initial feedback conversation or a day or two after you've thought it over. If you don't, you might as well say, “You were wrong to trust me,” because your direct report won't know if he or she was heard — *even if you act on the feedback*. Why? Behavior change is slow and often imperceptible to those around us. Sometimes we have to help people see that we're changing.

Here's an example of what you might say if you take the feedback:

“Thanks so much for your feedback, Eli. You make a great point. I’m going to work on talking less during meetings and making sure others get the opportunity to weigh in. If it’s OK with you, I’d also like to check in with you in our 1-on-1s to see if you notice any progress.”

Here's an example of what you might say if you don't take the feedback:

“Thanks so much for your feedback, Eli. I’ve given it a lot of thought. While hearing your feedback about my meeting facilitation was helpful, I’ve decided to prioritize another behavior change right now — committing more time to coaching the team. But it means a lot to me that you were honest, and I’m going to continue asking for your input.”

If you always find yourself dismissing or putting off applying your direct reports’ feedback, maybe you need to reconsider your motivations for asking in the first place. There’s nothing wrong with asking less frequently so that you can show you take what you learn seriously.

11. When you receive helpful feedback, share it (and your plans to address it) with the whole team.

On teams with especially healthy feedback cultures, managers go one step further and open up communication about their development plans with the entire team. This is an incredibly powerful way to signal that you take people’s feedback seriously.

In addition, direct reports who might have wanted to give similar feedback but avoided doing so will know that you’re addressing their unspoken concern. And maybe next time, instead of worrying about retribution, they’ll be the ones to speak up!

“I wanted to take a few minutes in today’s team meeting to let you know that I received some great input about my tendency to talk too much in group discussions. I realize I haven’t been doing enough to make sure you all have the chance to weigh in. While I won’t be able to make this change overnight — behavior change is hard — I’m going to work on it, and I may ask for additional feedback in the future to see whether I’ve improved.”

Imagine if a manager of yours had the courage to say that and actually followed through. That’s the stuff of direct reports’ dreams — and a mark of real leadership.