

The Feedback Paradox: Why Direct Feedback Often Backfires on the People Who Need It Most

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Be direct. Be clear. Don't sugarcoat it. It's the most common feedback advice there is, and for plenty of people it works beautifully.

For others, the more direct you are, the less of your message actually gets through. Not because they can't handle the truth, but because of what their brain does with it on the way in.

WHY "CLEAR" ISN'T ONE THING

Most feedback advice is written from the sender's side. Be clear, be direct, be concise. But clarity isn't a property of the message. It's a property of what lands.

Directness gets calibrated to the person giving it, not the person getting it. For some people, blunt feedback reads as respect. You're treating them like an adult who can take it. For others, that same bluntness reads as a threat. And when the brain reads as a threat, it shifts into protection mode. It stops processing the content and starts managing the danger.

That's the paradox. The words got clearer, and the message got harder to hear.

WHY THREAT BEATS INFORMATION

There's a reason this happens, and it isn't fragility. When the brain registers a social threat, it prioritizes safety over learning. The same feedback that would be useful in a calm state gets routed through the part of us that's scanning for danger. Details blur. The one word that stung gets remembered, and the three useful sentences around it disappear. You can't coach someone who's busy protecting themselves, and directness aimed at the wrong person is exactly what puts them there.

THE PEOPLE IT BACKFIRES ON MOST

Here's the uncomfortable part. The people most sensitive to that threat signal are often the ones who most need the feedback to land.

So a well-meaning leader sees someone struggling, decides the kind thing is to be direct about it, and turns up the bluntness. The receiver's brain turns up the defense to match. The feedback gets filed as an attack, not as information. Nothing changes, except now there's a bruise on the relationship too.

Give it a couple of rounds and it curdles into something worse. The leader decides this person "can't take feedback." The employee decides this leader "is just critical." The actual issue, that the message was calibrated to the sender and not the receiver, never gets named.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN REAL LIFE

Picture the same sentence delivered to two people. "This isn't working. You need to tighten it up."

One person hears a clear, useful ask. They know exactly what to do and they do it. The other person hears "you're failing," and spends the next week managing the anxiety instead of fixing the work. Same words. Same tone. Two completely different outcomes, because the two brains did two different things with the identical message.

Neither person is being difficult. They're just wired to receive differently, and the feedback only accounted for one of them.

WHAT "CLEAR" ACTUALLY MEANS

Clear means it landed, not that you said it plainly. That's a real shift, and it changes how you give feedback.

Calibrate to the receiver, not to your own comfort. Some people need the headline first. Others need a little context so the headline doesn't read as an ambush. Separate the behavior from the person, out loud, so the brain has less room to hear "you're failing." Lead with the specific thing, not the verdict. "The intro buries the ask" is information. "This isn't working" is a judgment the brain has to defend against.

And then check. Ask what they took away. If what they heard isn't what you meant, the feedback wasn't clear yet, no matter how directly you said it.

The goal was never to be direct. Directness is just a style. The goal was to be understood, and that's measured on the other person's side of the table, not yours.

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