# Harvard Business Review

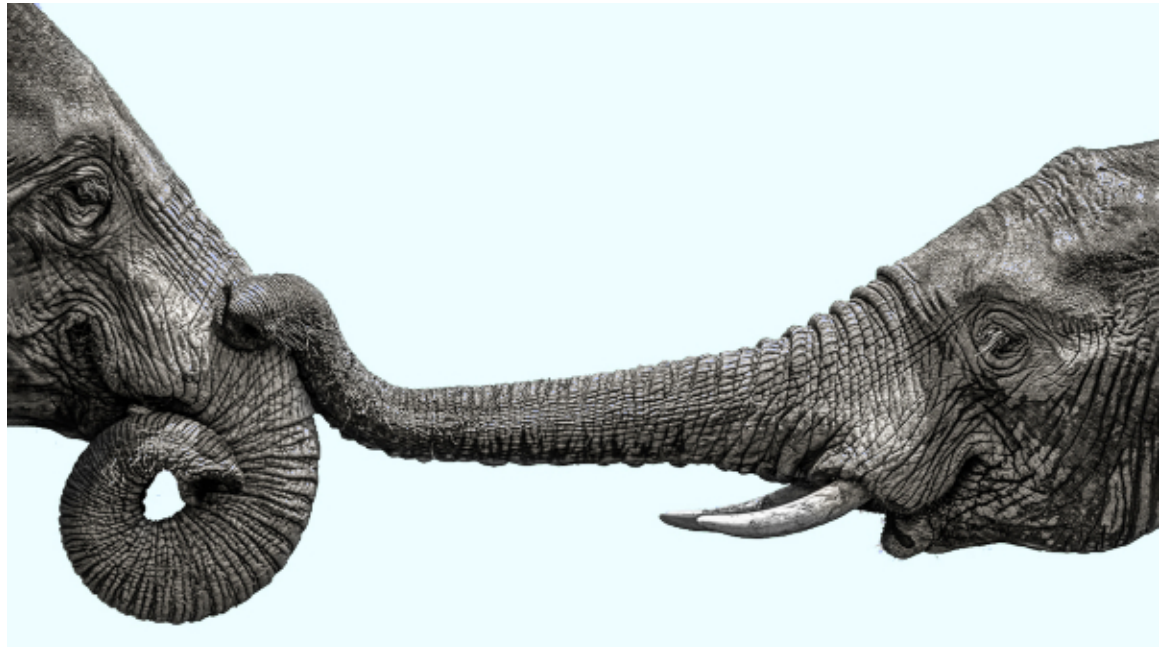## ARTICLE
### GIVING FEEDBACK

# Giving Feedback to Someone Who Hasn't Had It in Years

*by Ron Carucci*

**GIVING FEEDBACK**

# Giving Feedback to Someone Who Hasn't Had It in Years

by Ron Carucci

**JANUARY 22, 2020**



*MARIO MORENO/GETTY IMAGES*

Over the course of my career in organizational consulting, I've encountered a number of leaders who've gone for years, even decades, without feedback. This is partly due to the extent people will go to avoid difficult conversations. Study after study shows that more than 69% of us try to sidestep communicating negative information, and 37% won't give critical feedback at all. As a result, many leaders remain clueless about how others experience them.

Further research suggests that while most people believe they are self-aware, only about 10-15% of us actually are. Such a fundamental lack of self-knowledge can create a disconnect between who we *intend* to be, and who we *really* are. Patient and thoughtful feedback is perhaps one of the best ways to close that gap, but it requires a caring and willing colleague to offer it. When you are encountering someone who has gone uncalibrated for a significant amount of time more traditional approaches — such as 360 reviews or scorecards — are less likely to drive behavioral change. In my experience, a strategic and genuine one-on-one approach tends to be the most effective.

If you work with someone who's gone too long without feedback and want to help them grow, consider taking these steps to get started:

**1) Approach the conversation with empathy.** Recently, I conducted a series of executive assessment interviews for a client. One executive I worked with, let's call him Jake, had joined the organization about a year prior. Though 360 feedback was routine at the organization, Jake's former employer, where he worked for 20 years, had given him no formal feedback.  After one interview, his team member said to me, "I feel horrible about the things I've said about Jake. He has no idea we can't stand working with him." When I asked her why no one had given Jake feedback earlier, her reluctance was telling. All of Jake's colleagues had negative things to say about how difficult he was to work with, but had never told him directly.

As a result, Jake was shocked when he learned how others experienced him. He thought that people appreciated his "no nonsense" approach. But in reality, they found him overbearing and offensive.

Delivering feedback that exposes a wide gap in self-knowledge demands an extra measure of sensitivity. Like ripping off a scab, the sting of discovering such a profound gap often elicits strong emotions that can easily be confused as defensiveness. If you're someone who's born the brunt of your colleague's difficult behavior, be sure you can set those frustrations aside in favor of the empathy you'll need for this conversation. Before you even approach your colleague, be prepared to give them the space they'll need to feel shocked upon receiving your feedback. Remember not to interpret it as intensified resistance to your message.

**2) Test for understanding of the gap.** When someone is unaware of the consequences of their actions, it is a sign that there is a gap between their intentions and the outcomes those intentions yield. The best way to begin the conversation, then, is to ask questions to clarify their motives. If a leader is constantly forcing their ideas on others, as Jake did, you might start with questions like, "What did you intend to have happen during the meeting? How were you hoping the team would respond to your idea?"

Pinpointing the disparity between the person's objective and the outcome of their actions will help you calculate how large their self-knowledge gap is.  The further from themselves they attribute unwanted outcomes, the larger the gap.

Social psychologists sometimes refer to this situation as the actor-observer bias, one in which the person in question is inclined to attribute their actions to the situation rather than to themselves. For example, a leader who is trying to convince others to adopt their idea, like Jake, might respond to other's pushback with aggression. Their explanation to the above questions might be, "I wanted the team to see what a great opportunity this was. People didn't get it until I expressed my idea passionately. Then they finally realized that I was right." Whereas the team might describe the same experience as, "He was shouting at us and wouldn't let anyone else talk. We finally just shut down and gave in."

If you understand the gap between your colleague's intentions and impact you will have a much easier time helping them recognize it as well.

**3) Talk about feelings, not attributions.** Once you are aware of your colleague's intentions, you need to separate them from their actions in order to have a productive discussion. One of the major mistakes I've seen people make with severely uncalibrated leaders is assuming they are more aware than they are. Conclusions like, "How could they *not* know?" only justify feelings of anger and defensiveness on both ends.

Sticking with the example of Jake above, you might continue the conversation by saying, "I appreciate how passionate you are about your ideas, and I admire you wanting to champion them." In this way, you are acknowledging his good intentions instead of inferring that he purposefully railroads others. Follow up by stating how his actions impacted you, "While I now understand that it wasn't your intention to do so, during the meeting, I felt you dismissed my input because of how often you interrupted me, and refuted my ideas by restating your own more adamantly." Then, emphasize that this is a recurring problem to help him understand the weight of its impact, and affirm your intent in approaching him. "This isn't the first time I've felt this way, and I thought it was important to raise it with you so that we can maintain a positive relationship."

Be sure to not to invoke others into your feedback. Saying things like, "We're all frustrated by your behavior," may make the person feel paranoid or ganged up on by the group, and result in feelings of distrust. If you want your colleague to acknowledge, and ultimately, change their behavior, your goal should be to establish a safe environment in which they can be vulnerable.

**4) Point out patterns.** Offering three to four specific examples that reveal the pattern of behavior you want your colleague to change can help them recognize the source of the gap in their self-knowledge.

If you see a pattern in the types of situations that bring out the unwanted behavior, for example, point them out. This can be especially helpful if your colleague defaults to naming the situation, or the people in it, as the cause of the problem. When giving examples, you should be sure to keep your emotions in check. While talking about your feelings is instructive, displaying your frustrations may shut the other person down.

In the case of Jake, you might offer something like, "It seems like high-pressure situations that require you to be persuasive bring out this side of you, would you agree?" On one hand, using conjecture gives him the right to disagree. On the other hand, you are giving him an opportunity to recognize a destructive pattern. Doing so will make it easier for him to shift attributing the origin of the problem outside of himself to the result of his choices. Once this happens, someone like Jake can start to consider alternative ways to handle those situations in the future.

**5) Help them stay focused on the future.** Discovering an enormous gap between how you *think* you come across and how you *actually do* can be disorienting and disheartening. The abrupt awakening can trigger strong emotions, instantly reorganizing our perceptions of the past. Jake was moved to tears as he read the painful words his colleagues used to describe him. He inevitably asked me, *"Why didn't anyone tell me sooner?"*

This loaded question is common in these situations, and it usually arises when someone is feeling a mix of self-contempt (*Am I really that horrible*?) and resentment towards their coworkers (*I could have changed if they'd told me).* It demands a delicate response to avoid inflaming those feelings. Resist the temptation to list failed attempts to offer feedback *(Well, I tried, but you...).* Doing so, is just your desire to self-sooth. Instead, offer an empathic response focused on the future, like, "I'm sorry this feedback feels new. I can only imagine how difficult this is to hear for the first time. I think your best option is to focus on what you can do now rather than what you did in the past."

Working with someone who's oblivious is never easy. Sadly, sometimes they must be exited from the organization. But drawing conclusions like, "they're too far gone," or, "they're not my problem," is using their bad behavior to justify withholding feedback, which is cruel in itself. You shouldn't assume someone can't change if they've never been given the chance. You may be able to offer that opportunity to a struggling colleague. If your actions were causing others pain, what would you want them to do?

---

**Ron Carucci** is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change for their organizations, leaders, and industries. He is the best-selling author of eight books, including the recent Amazon #1 *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Twitter at @RonCarucci; download his free e-book on Leading Transformation.

---