

Giving feedback constructively – as a reviewer or an appraiser

Giving feedback constructively does improve learning. It can also improve competence.¹ This feedback may be given as part of the appraisal of your health care assistant (HCA), or at any other time when commenting on their work and performance.

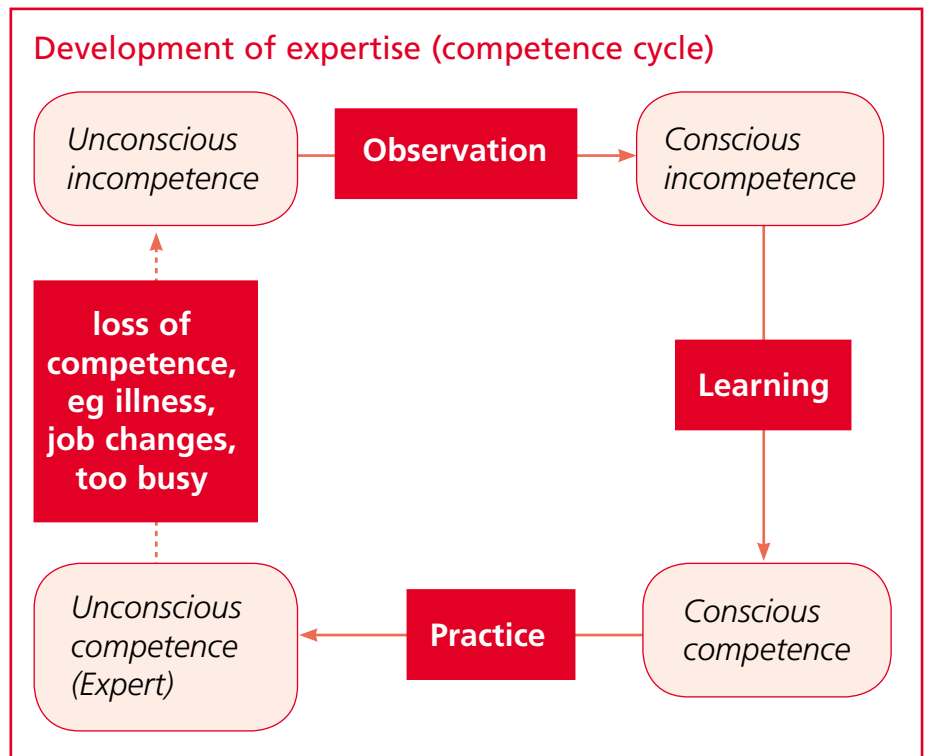
Constructive feedback

It is important that as well as being positive in tone (for reasons of self-esteem, morale and the development of good communication skills), there should be discussion on areas for improvement – but this feedback should be positive in content. You may find it difficult to give feedback with ‘teeth’, ie giving feedback that includes enough specific examples of where performance needs to be improved and doing it without being negative or delivering it in an unhelpful way. You should aim to give feedback about both deficiencies and strengths. To see why this is so, consider the model of the development of expertise in Figure: *Development of expertise (competence cycle)*.^{2,3}

Development of expertise (competency cycle)

Unconscious incompetence

Starting in the top left-hand quadrant of Figure: *Development of expertise (competency cycle)*, you will see that as a learner (unconscious incompetence) you are most likely to be unaware of your shortcomings until something happens to make you aware of them. This might be the realisation that you are out of your depth, or later in your career it could be as a result of a patient complaint, adverse incident or feedback from a colleague.



Conscious incompetence

It is during the transition between unconscious incompetence and conscious competence that you are just beginning to learn. If the problem recurs however, it can be de-motivating. To help with coping in this situation, it might be useful to get some feedback about your other strengths as this will undoubtedly increase your morale and be supportive at this stage.

Conscious competence

The process of learning, with all that it entails, can then proceed to help you master the new understanding, knowledge or task. You then reach a stage where you know something new or know how to do something new and can competently perform, so long as circumstances remain constant. This is represented by the bottom right-hand quadrant of Figure: *Development of expertise (competence cycle)*.

Unconscious competence

With practice and experience, you can become an expert and will begin to apply and modify your knowledge and skills in new situations that you may never have met before. At this stage, the bottom left-hand quadrant, you could teach others. It is also the stage when through familiarity, you can lose sight of your strengths, as your skills become automatic.

Competence from an appraiser's point of view

As an appraiser, the feedback you give on your appraisee's performance at the stage of conscious competence needs to include things they are good at so that they do not accept them as commonplace. Reflect on them, keep them up-to-date and highlight them. In some ways, feedback needs to take them from left to right across the bottom of the competence cycle to make them aware of their expertise again.

It is possible to move full circle back to unconscious incompetence from a position of expertise. Due to illness for example, or through a failure to keep up-to-date. Feedback in this position is very difficult, which is another good reason to include a reminder of their remaining positive attributes and skills.

This model provides a theoretical reason, behind the observations, for why constructive feedback needs to contain commentary on strengths as well as things that need to be improved. It also reinforces the imperative for feedback to 'have teeth'. The skill of the effective appraiser or reviewer is to find the balance between support and challenge – the best feedback is high on support and high on challenge.

Methods of giving feedback constructively

This is a model of feedback that will help you to provide constructive feedback in a structured way. Remember, there is one golden rule: give positive praise first.

General rules to follow

1. *Focus on behaviour rather than interpretation.*
2. *Give specific examples.*
3. *Aim to be descriptive or sensory based, rather than interpretive, non-sensory based.*
(see Box: The difference between evaluative, interpretive or judgemental use of language and descriptive/sensory-based language).
4. *Aim to be non-judgmental, rather than evaluative.*

The difference between evaluative, interpretive or judgemental use of language and descriptive/sensory-based language

Evaluative, interpretive or judgemental language	Descriptive/sensory-based language
'The beginning was awful, you just seemed to ignore her'	'At the start, you were looking at the notes, which prevented eye contact'
'The beginning was excellent, great stuff'	'At the beginning, you gave her your full attention and never lost eye contact – your facial expression registered interest in what she was saying'
'It's no good getting embarrassed when patients talk about their sexual history'	'I noticed you were very flushed when she spoke about her husband's impotence, and you lost eye contact'

Pendleton's rules

This model is useful as a set of general principles to be used in giving feedback after different activities, including: practical skills, consultations and case presentations. It is a step-by-step model, in which each step is important, and should be carried out in the order described below.⁴

1. *The learner goes first and performs the activity.*
2. *Questions are then allowed only on points of clarification of fact.*
3. *The learner then says what they thought was done well.*
4. *The person giving feedback then says what they thought was done well.*
5. *The learner then says what was not done so well and could be improved upon.*
6. *The person giving feedback then says what was not done so well and suggests ways for improvement with discussion in a supportive manner.*

This model is useful for formal situations, such as appraisal with recipients who are not happy with feedback (eg individuals who are nervous) when the recipient lacks insight and to help learners say what is good about their performance.

The best way to learn how to give effective feedback is to practise. Sometimes, a structured model feels artificial and unhelpful until you develop a language and series of phrases to help. It is also useful to (seek and then) reflect on feedback you might be given by others and think about what aspects of what was said were most helpful and what aspects got in the way of you improving your performance.

References

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