



GIVING AND ACCEPTING FEEDBACK

www.kristenhadeed.com

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT FEEDBACK

If you're reading this guide, chances are it's because you're not sure how to give or receive feedback effectively—and maybe it scares you a little. So first, we want to say: We hear you! And we're here to help.

If you've had negative experiences with critical feedback, you may instinctively look at it as something that just makes people feel bad, no matter how it's given. That's understandable: Most people are never taught how to give feedback effectively, so it's unlikely that you've experienced many examples of good, critical feedback.

The same can be true for recognition and positive feedback. Think about the times someone has told you, "Good job!" or "You did great!" It probably felt good, right? Sure it did. We love to be recognized. But what if someone said to you, "I loved hearing your perspective in the meeting today. It reinforced to me how valuable you are to this team." Woah! How would *that* make you feel? Even better, right?

Effective feedback is a crucial part of any organization, but it's especially important to the ones that strive to be open, supportive, and empowering, like we do at Student Maid. We've done a lot of work with feedback, and we want to share with you our best advice on how to give both critical and positive feedback, how to accept critical feedback, and how to recognize people in a way that makes them feel valued and encouraged. Our advice is based on what we've learned and experienced at Student Maid and also what we've learned from our friends at Barry Wehmiller, who generously allow us to share their innovative feedback tool.

WHY DO WE GIVE FEEDBACK?

Before we get into the "how" of feedback, let's talk about the "why."

Generally speaking, we give feedback because we want to inspire someone to either change or maintain their behavior. Positive feedback highlights the recipient's strengths and contributions so they feel encouraged to continue doing those things. Critical feedback makes the recipient aware of their blindspots so they can see where they need to learn and grow. In short: We give feedback because we care.

But as we're sure you've experienced, it can be hard to find the right words and method to do this, especially when there are emotions or uneven power structures involved. And with critical feedback especially, when we don't have the right



approach, we can leave the door open to defensiveness, anger, frustration, and even retaliation, which is the last thing we want feedback to do.

What we need instead is a way to give feedback that helps us get our point across clearly and effectively every time so the recipient is inspired to take action.

Luckily, we have just the tool for that: The FBI.

THE FBI STATEMENT

Years ago, Kristen took a class about communication from our friends at Barry Wehmiller. One of the things she learned about was the FBI statement, which is the tool they use for giving feedback in their company. It completely changed the way Kristen viewed and gave feedback, and she felt it was so important and effective that she taught it to the rest of our team. Today, the FBI is part of our regular training for all new team members.

“FBI” stands for Feeling, Behavior, Impact: the three components of effective feedback. The FBI can be used to give both critical *and* positive feedback. Let’s break it down:

FEELING: FBI statements always begin with “I feel” or “I felt,” followed by a specific feeling. Starting with how someone’s behavior makes *you* feel helps put the emphasis on how their behavior affected you.

BEHAVIOR: Identify the *specific* behavior that caused you to feel this way. The more specific the better. If you’re too general, it will be hard for them to understand what you mean. Give them details and context, including time and place (i.e. “at yesterday’s meeting”).

IMPACT: Tell the person about the impact of their behavior. Again, be as specific as possible. It will help explain why you’re giving them the feedback, why it’s important, and why they should care. This is key to inspiring them to do something with your feedback.

STRUCTURE

Here’s how the FBI functions in a sentence (or series of sentences):

I feel/felt [your feeling]

How does their behavior make YOU feel?

When you [their behavior]

What did this person do? Be as specific as possible. Include context such time and place.



And the impact it has is **[impact]**

How does this impact you? Your relationship? The organization?

DELIVERY

Once you've put your feedback in the right order, the next most important part is how you deliver it.

We strongly suggest that whenever possible, deliver your feedback in person, *especially* if it's critical. If you must, give it via phone or video call. It's important that you *never* deliver feedback via text.

Why not? Because with text, you're essentially giving the recipient just 10 percent of the communication. They're missing out on your body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and nonverbal cues. Most of the time, when feedback goes wrong, it's because it's given in a way that makes it hard for the recipient to interpret. At Student Maid, we have a rule that we never have important conversations over text for this very reason.

It's OK to deliver positive feedback via text, but know that it will have a much bigger impact if you deliver it in person.

EXAMPLES

Let's explore what an FBI should look like and why.

CRITICAL FEEDBACK

When you give someone critical feedback, it's natural to want to begin by saying, "You did this . . ." But starting with "you" gives the other person a reason to get defensive immediately and discount what you say. It also assumes that you know how they feel or why they did something, which is not why you're giving them feedback. The feedback needs to stay focused on how their behavior made *you* feel in order to be effective, which is why you start with "I."

Avoid words such as *always* or *never*, which leave room for the other person to argue. "I'm not *always* late; I was on time yesterday!" or, "I do the dishes *sometimes*; I just didn't do them today!"

FBI statements are meant to be conversation starters, not enders. When you need to give someone critical feedback and you use an FBI, don't think of it as checking a box off a list. Think of it as inviting someone to start a dialogue with you. To emphasize this, you can end your FBI with: "Can you help?"



Here are a couple examples of what this looks like:

INSTEAD OF: “You’re always late”

Scenario: Your coworker arrives 30 minutes late to an important, hour-long team meeting.

FBI: I felt frustrated when you showed up 30 minutes late to our meeting today. The impact is that you missed a lot of important information, so now, I have to spend time getting you caught up on what you missed instead of working on a project with a tight deadline. I would love to understand your perspective. Can you help?

INSTEAD OF: “You just don’t care”

Scenario: A member of a team you lead didn’t complete their part of a project on time.

FBI: I felt disappointed and upset when you showed up without your part of the project completed today. The impact is that I no longer feel like I can count on you as part of our team. Can you help?

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

When you’re giving positive feedback, it’s impactful and helpful if you can pinpoint the actions, traits, or skills that moved you to give it so that recipients can recognize these things in themselves. Think of it as part of an ongoing effort to show people what they mean to you and how much you appreciate them.

Here are a couple examples:

INSTEAD OF: “Thanks for speaking up”

Scenario: You notice that your coworker spoke up in a meeting and shared his opinion, even though it was difficult for him to do so.

FBI: I felt proud when you spoke up in the meeting this morning and shared your opinion, even though I know it was difficult for you. The impact is that after you spoke, everyone else felt more comfortable sharing their own thoughts, which helped us have a more productive meeting. Thank you!

INSTEAD OF: “Thanks for helping out”

Scenario: A member of a team you lead stayed behind to help you clean up after an office party.



FBI: I felt appreciative when you stayed late to help me clean up today, especially because I know you would have rather gone home. The impact it has is that it makes me feel supported and like the work is not always on my shoulders. Thank you!



Specificity also applies to the way you describe your feelings. But sometimes, it can be hard to think of the right word to describe how we feel. We encourage our team members to refer to a feelings wheel, like the one below, when they're having trouble articulating their emotions. (View full-size image [here](#).)



PRACTICE

Now that you're more familiar with how FBIs work, let's practice writing some.

We'll start with a recognition FBI. Think of a time within the last two weeks when someone did something that you want to recognize them for.

I feel:

when you (specific behavior):

The impact is that:



Now, let's try a critical FBI. Think of a time within the last two weeks when someone did something that you wish they had done differently.

I feel:

when you (specific behavior):

The impact is that:



REVIEW

Check the statements you wrote and ask yourself:

- Was I as specific as possible about the way I felt? Could I have used a stronger word?
- Was I as specific as possible about their behavior? Did I include time, place, or other information that provides context?
- Was I clear about the impact of their behavior? Did I connect their actions to the bigger picture?
- For recognition FBI: If someone gave me this FBI, would it make me feel good and inspire me to continue that behavior?
- For critical FBI: If someone gave me this FBI, would it inspire me to want to make a change to my behavior?

If your answer to any of these questions is “no” or “maybe,” try again until you feel like your FBI sends the right message. It’s OK if you don’t get it right off the bat. Give yourself some grace—it takes practice!

Throughout this guide, when we talk about giving feedback, we’re talking about giving it in FBI format.



CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR FEEDBACK

Before you start doling out FBIs, let's talk about how you can create the kind of environment that is conducive to giving and receiving feedback, no matter your position.

SAFE & SUPPORTIVE SPACE

For people to feel comfortable sharing feedback, they need to feel safe and supported. They need to be certain that when they give feedback, it won't be held against them or dismissed. When they receive it, they need to know that they will have a chance to do something with it to show that they're willing to learn and grow.

If you lead a team, recognize that you set the tone. However you feel about feedback is how your team will learn to feel about it, so it's up to you to encourage and create the space for it. A good way to start is by asking others to give feedback to you. You could do this by leaving time at the end of meetings for questions, comments, and concerns or by encouraging people to stop by your office and talk with you. Or, from time to time, just ask the people on your team, "How am I doing?" "How do you think I could have handled this situation better?" You may find that you get better results by having these conversations one-on-one at first.

If your workplace doesn't have a supportive culture or there is no precedent for giving receiving feedback regularly, start small. If a coworker does something you think they should be recognized for, give them an FBI in front of the group. Now that you have these feedback tools, we also strongly encourage you to be the change in your organization by "leading up." If we don't speak up and tell our leaders how we feel about their behavior, how will they learn and grow? It's easier said than done; we know! But we speak from experience here: Some of the most important, impactful changes at Student Maid happened because a team member had the courage to tell our leadership team how we could be better.

TIMING

We suggest that whenever possible, give the feedback as soon as you can—but that doesn't mean immediately. Give yourself enough time to think through your emotions, carefully decide what you want to say, and plan so that you're intentional with your delivery. It's OK to take up to 24 hours to do this, but we suggest that you don't let it go longer than that. You want to avoid letting so much time pass that the recipient doesn't remember what you're talking about.



Another important thing to avoid: Don't tell someone that you want to give them feedback and then make them wait! This allows them time to stress out, overthink, and then show up in defense mode. Instead, let them know that you want to give them feedback, and then give it soon after. For example: "I'd like to talk with you after the meeting. Could you stay behind for five minutes?"

RATIO OF POSITIVE TO NEGATIVE

There have been plenty of studies done about the ideal ratio of positive to critical feedback. But we believe that the exact ratio doesn't matter. In fact, we believe it can actually be harmful to focus on numbers because it keeps you focused on a checklist instead of intentional, authentic feedback.

Instead, we follow the example of the emotional bank account in [Steven Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People."](#) The idea is that everyone has an emotional bank account, and other people can make deposits or withdrawals with their words and actions. Feedback is one of the biggest ways to affect the balance of an emotional bank account.

Genuine, specific recognition is a big deposit. Generic recognition ("Good job!" "You're the best!") is still a deposit, just not as big. A great way to boost your deposit is by giving the recognition in FBI form. Even better? Do it publicly. (One caveat here: You know your people best. If you don't think they would appreciate public recognition, one-on-one is fine.)

Critical feedback is a withdrawal, but the way it's delivered is what determines how big the withdrawal is. Glib, sarcastic, public, or off-the-cuff critical feedback are all large withdrawals. The biggest withdrawal is when someone hears your critical feedback from someone *else*. So, first: Your feedback should always come from you. Then, use the FBI form. The FBI helps shrink the amount of the withdrawal by telling the recipient exactly why you're giving them feedback and what you would like them to do with it. The fact that you took the time to put it in FBI form underlines the fact that you care about them and want to help.

Consider: What's your balance with the people you work closest with? What about the people you're closest to in life? How can you be intentional about making those balances positive?



GIVING CRITICAL FEEDBACK

Feedback is not easy. It's *never* easy, no matter how much practice you have. And it only gets harder the more you care about people.

It's so much easier to completely avoid giving critical feedback, but avoiding it is selfish. When you avoid it, what you're really saying is, "I don't want to tell you something that will help you grow because I don't want to be uncomfortable."

Let's explore ways to give critical feedback and address some of the factors that can make doing so more difficult.

TRUST

When critical feedback goes wrong, it's often due to a lack of trust. In order for feedback to work, the relationship has to function like this:

Giver: I am giving you feedback because I care about you and want to help you grow.

Recipient: I understand that you care about me, and I know that you're giving me this feedback because you want to help me grow.

No matter how well you deliver your feedback, if you don't have a foundation of trust with the other person, it will be hard for them to accept.

PREFACE

It can be jarring for the receiver if you dive straight into an FBI, especially if they aren't expecting to get feedback from you. To set the tone, here are some things you can say and do:

- Open with, "I need to tell you something that's hard for me to say, but I'm telling you because it's important and I care about you."
- Write down your FBI and say, "I have something that I want to share that's really hard to say, so I want to read what I wrote to make sure I get the words right."
- If you're giving someone feedback about something you've done, too: "This is hard for me to say because I've done this myself, but it makes me want to do it less. I'm sorry if I've ever done it to you."



Feedback is not a monologue; it's a dialogue. Encourage the other person to share their perspective and give them a chance to respond to what you said. You can do that by prefacing your FBI with something like:

- "I would like to share some feedback with you, and afterward, I would like to have a conversation about it and hear your perspective. If you would like to give me feedback as well, please do."

If they're not ready to have a conversation, that's OK! Give them time and space so that they can take the time to process their emotions and be intentional, just like you did. By offering them feedback, you've opened the door. That conversation doesn't need to happen right away for it to be effective. But again, we suggest that you have it sooner rather than later.

AUTHENTICITY

Be your authentic self when you give feedback. If you pretend to be someone you're not, it will come off as disingenuous, and it will make it easy for the recipient to dismiss it. It's also important to share how you're genuinely feeling and not how you think you *should* feel.

We understand that the formality of the FBI might feel disingenuous and inauthentic to you, so we encourage you to inject your personality into it. Use words and phrases that feel right to you. As long as your FBI communicates your genuine feelings, it will be genuine.

ROADBLOCKS

Even if you practice your FBI a hundred times and examine it to make sure every word is right, there's no guarantee that it will have the desired effect. Sometimes, giving someone feedback involves more than saying the right words in the right order.

Let's explore some common roadblocks to critical feedback.

WHAT IF THE FEEDBACK ISN'T WELL RECEIVED?

Critical feedback is hard for a lot of people to hear, and it can bring up strong emotions in them: anger, insecurity, guilt, shame. It could also cause them to shut down, withdraw, and stay silent.

People bring their past experiences with them to every conversation. It's not intentional; that's just what humans do! So when someone's emotions exceed the moment, there's more to the story. Consider that a person's reaction to your feedback isn't only a result of what you said; it's also due to their past experiences.



Your feedback may cause them to remember painful situations that influenced how they're feeling now. That's why it's so important to approach these conversations with empathy. Try not to make assumptions about why they're reacting this way, and remind yourself that it's not about you.

One of the best things you can do in these moments is work to understand more about this person and where their reaction is coming from. Invite them to tell you more about how they're feeling by saying, "Tell me more." But keep in mind that they may not be ready or willing to tell you. If that's the case, hit pause on your feedback conversation, and give them time and space to think. Let them know when you'll follow up, and emphasize that you want this to be a conversation. Encourage them to come with feedback of their own.

WHAT IF THE FEEDBACK DOESN'T WORK?

As we said before, even when you take all the right steps (FBI format, delivered in person, coming from a place of caring and empathy), sometimes, feedback just doesn't work. There could be many reasons for this, but we're going to focus on two big ones: 1) The person is really trying, but they haven't been able to fix the problem, or 2) They just don't care.

At Student Maid, we look to something we call The Line to decide what to do in these situations. The Line is a metaphor for what it takes for a relationship to work. As a leadership team, we stand at The Line when we give our team members the tools they need, set clear expectations, welcome and implement their feedback, and trust them to do their jobs the best they can. Our team members stand at The Line when they make decisions in line with our values, speak up when they have feedback or see something is wrong, and choose to learn and grow from the feedback we give them.

If either one of us ignores feedback completely and chooses not to act on it, that's not standing at The Line. That means we are unwilling to do our part to make the relationship work, and as such, the relationship should end.

But if we're really trying to do something with the feedback and it's just not working, that's different. Trying means we're doing our best to stand at The Line.

If you're the leader in this situation, ask yourself: Have you set clear expectations? Have you given them the tools they need? If not, start there.

Then, consider that people need to own their accountability. If you tell someone what to do, it has less of a chance of working than if they come up with a solution on their own. At Student Maid, we put our team members in charge of their own accountability with something we call the Accountability Action Plan. When they make a mistake or when we give them critical feedback, we don't lay out the next



steps for them; we put them in charge of coming up with a plan for turning the situation around. Our philosophy is that even if the plan doesn't work, as long as they're trying something different, it's not failure. Making the same mistakes again and again is failure. We will continue to try to help them as long as they're willing to keep trying. (There are limits, of course, but that's for another guide!)

As a leader, it's not your job to fix people. It's your job to make them aware of what's happening and inspire them to do the work and grow.

If you're the team member in this situation and your leader is trying but failing to do something with your feedback, come to them with solutions. Chances are that your leader is overwhelmed and will welcome your help. You could even try implementing your solutions yourself by asking, "Do I have your buy-in to move forward?"

Few people have the courage to tell their leader, "Here's where you can be better." If you're speaking up, being honest, and your leader is not at The Line with you, maybe it's time to walk away. You deserve someone who is going to take your feedback and do something with it.

At the end of the day, a person has to want to change their behavior. It's their responsibility to do the self-work; all you can do is help them recognize what they need to do.

ACCEPTING CRITICAL FEEDBACK

Accepting critical feedback is *hard*. But why is that?

Our earliest memories of conflict and confrontation can affect how we view critical feedback as adults. Take a moment to consider how conflict and confrontation has made you feel in the past. Were you scared? Angry? Upset? Frustrated? Invalidated? Anxious? Or, if you can't remember much conflict or nothing significant stands out, that may be telling as well. Maybe you didn't have to deal with much conflict, so you never learned how to handle it. Maybe you were a kid during the self-esteem movement (hi, fellow millennials!), and you were only praised, so now, any criticism is catastrophic to you. Whatever your experience with conflict and confrontation, it's likely that it didn't always make you feel heard, supported, validated, or trusted.

For your first step in learning to accept critical feedback, we suggest that you try to understand your relationship with conflict and confrontation. Ask yourself: When do you get triggered? What words, phrases, or situations related to feedback incite strong emotions in you? What past experiences do you think contributed to these triggers?



Once you understand more about why critical feedback causes these emotions, you can start to flip the script. We want to help you do that by offering a positive view of critical feedback.

A CHANCE TO BUILD TRUST

Accepting critical feedback is a chance to build trust between you and the person giving it to you. Even if your instinct is to argue or get defensive, work to train yourself to respond with something like, “Thank you. I know that was hard for you to say, and I appreciate that you spoke up and told me.” The message that sends is, “You can trust me. It’s OK to give me feedback again.” If you shut down, get defensive, go quiet, argue, make them feel bad, etc., you send the opposite message: “Don’t ever speak up again because there’s no point; I am unteachable, and I don’t care about what you have to say.”

A CHANCE TO GROW

When someone says they want to give you feedback, instead of getting anxious or scared or angry, remind yourself that what they tell you might help you become a better version of yourself. That’s what we’re all after, right? We want to grow as people.

Remind yourself that in all likelihood, this person is speaking up because they care about you, and they want to help. Even if they don’t get the delivery quite right and some of their words hurt, it’s coming from a good place. Recognize the effort they put into giving you the feedback to help you grow when they didn’t have to.

A CHANCE TO OPEN A DIALOGUE

What if you don’t have a good or trusting relationship with the person giving you feedback? If you don’t view them as “on your team,” you may be even more reluctant to listen to and accept what they have to say. And that’s perfectly reasonable.

Consider this an opportunity to open a dialogue with this person. Once they give you feedback, thank them, and say, “Would it be all right if I gave you some feedback as well?” If they’re open to it, you might be able to start a productive conversation. If not, remember The Line: If they’re not willing to listen or use your feedback, it’s reasonable to decide to walk away.

WHAT IF THE FEEDBACK IS WRONG?

We all have our own opinions and perspectives. Even if you disagree with what this person said or think it’s untrue, there’s a reason they said it: Something you’ve done or



said has made them feel this way. Before you say anything else, thank them for sharing their feedback. Make them feel heard. If you dismiss it, you will prevent them from giving feedback again. Then, start a dialogue: Say, “Tell me more.” After that, share your point of view so they understand your perspective.

GIVING RECOGNITION

Now for the fun part!

Recognition is an important part of an open, supportive, empowering culture. As we said before, the occasional, “Great job!” and, “You’re the best!” certainly doesn’t hurt, but it’s not as meaningful as recognition delivered in FBI form. Let’s explore other ways to make sure we’re giving recognition that truly matters.

ABOVE & BEYOND

What we don’t want to do is recognize people for doing what’s expected, like being on time. This sets the expectation that people need only do the bare minimum to earn your praise, which makes it less valuable and, in turn, makes them feel less valued. Instead, recognize when someone goes above and beyond and does something that makes you go, “Wow!”

UNIQUE STRENGTHS

People deserve to be praised for using their unique strengths to great effect. Pinpointing these strengths when you give recognition helps that person see those things in themselves, and it will inspire them to continue to use those strengths. It also helps them see their unique value to the team and to you, which goes a long way to making them feel supported and empowered.

INSPIRATION

Recognition inspires continued outstanding behavior. When you’re preparing your recognition FBI, think: What, specifically, did this person do that you want them to do again?



THINKING BIGGER:

BEYOND ONE-ON-ONE FEEDBACK

Here are some of the ways we use feedback beyond one-on-one interactions at Student Maid:

360 REVIEWS

- When we do reviews with our team members, we use a format called the 360. With a 360 review, both the reviewer and the reviewee give and receive feedback. Each person comes to the review with what they think their two biggest strengths and weaknesses are as well as what they think the biggest strengths and weaknesses of the other person are. Then, they talk about actions they can take to address their weaknesses.
- We believe that the content of a review should never be a surprise to the reviewee. They should have already gotten feedback (in FBI form!) on any problems. The review should consist of a summary of that feedback and a conversation about how things are going in a big-picture sense.

“WOW” WALL

- When you walk into our office, you’ll see one wall taken up entirely by clipboards. On each clipboard is either a glowing review from a customer or a recognition FBI from one team member to another. We rarely get to be together in person as a team, so the WOW Wall is how we publicly recognize team members for going above and beyond on the day-to-day.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

- We ask for feedback from our customers in three ways:
 - We send an online survey after every cleaning. This is not an ideal way to get feedback, but it’s the most efficient. To encourage more customers to send in surveys, we added a sentence that articulates what we do with their feedback and why it matters: “We will share this feedback with our team members to help them learn and grow, so please share!”
 - We call to check in a couple times a year. An online survey can only tell us so much about how a client feels about their service, so every now and then, we call our clients and ask if there’s anything else they think we should know or if they have suggestions for ways we could improve



our service.

- We have client focus groups. Any time we make a big change, like changing our pricing structure, we ask a handful of clients to participate in a focus group. In exchange for coming to our office and answering our questions, we offer them a meal and a discount on their next cleaning service.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Feedback is a gift. When you give it, it shows that you care. When others give it to you, it shows that they care. Welcome it!

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