Feedback and Options for When We Are Upset with Someone Else's Behavior

Feedback is essential. Without information from interactions with others, we miss crucial guidance that supports us in connecting, being effective or meeting our goals. Feedback loops take a huge variety of forms, including anything from an official review in writing to how someone holds their body when you are near them. One time Tree asked Diana Leafe Christian (buddy and expert in intentional communities) how to vet references on someone's application to live in shared housing. Diana replied, "Call the applicant's reference on the phone, and when they answer, listen to the quality of the pause between when you say what and who you are calling about, and when they start to speak." That said, this handout mainly addresses information offered consciously and explicitly in an attempt to make things better.

A Few Thoughts on Feedback

- **If you exchange open feedback with someone, it acts to prevent conflict building up.** It's much easier to deal with issues when they are small.
- **You can't control other people, but you can control your own choices, including your choice of how you react to them.** Laird Schaub says, "There are powerful things that can be gained by looking at what you can accomplish on your own, examining your actions and responses. This is not about abandoning your interests or changing your values; it's about making decisions about the sense it makes to continue with the same reactions in the face of unchanging behaviors."
- When someone calls me up amid a difficult situation and starts giving a story where they are highly frustrated with someone else's behavior, first i listen for a good while and reflect back, offering a kind ear . . . and then eventually i ask, "When this person does that [frustrating behavior], what is your usual response?" It consistently turns out to be something that enables the problematic behavior to continue, such as (most commonly) avoidance. **We can't control others, but we often influence them.**
- **Experiment! Imagine what you might do if you weren't worried what would happen,** try roleplaying it by yourself or with a supportive friend. Often this kind of brainstorming and experimentation can get us past paralysis of old patterns into something new and creative to try.
- Laird Schaub says: "**Most of us have been culturally conditioned to resist critical information** (and defend ourselves as a knee-jerk response). Even though we need a constant flow of information for growth—and critical reflections are almost always more valuable in this regard than favorable comments —there is a pervasive tendency to shoot the messengers (or at least shoo them)."

Reflective Listening—Tool of 1st Resort

- You always have the power to offer good listening to someone you are in tension with. If you do, chances are high that you will gain more understanding and also that they might be willing to listen to you next.
- Keep your reflections as clean as possible, avoid adding your own spin or interpretation.
- You don't have to parrot back the same words. Focus on their story, and especially the feelings involved, offering back the essence of what you heard.
- Be nonjudgmental, listening with as much genuine heart and compassion as you can muster.
- This takes practice. Be open to feedback on improving your reflective listening skills.

Menu of Options

There is no one right way to address or resolve an upset. You might:

- Walk, journal, dance it off, do your own private spiritual work to let it go.
- Do an "innerwork" exercise such as those listed on Tree's website—these are exercises for getting in touch with your own piece and empowerment, for example looking at what you have to learn from the other person, or imagining a conversation with them where the conflict is resolved.
- If you choose to vent to a friend, be careful not to draw that person into blaming the other. If you are listening to someone vent, don't fan the flames—be constructive and encourage them to take responsibility; invite options on how they are going to proceed with the other person.
- Approach someone on your own, being thoughtful about how to set up conditions where the other person will feel respected and safe.
- Request help and support from people who can help hold a fair and neutral space for conversation.
- What else?

Roles of Offerer & Receiver

Exchanging feedback requires responsibility on the part of both the giver and the receiver. Here are some things to keep in mind in each role. What might you add to these lists?

Offerer

- What is your relationship with this person? If the only time they ever hear from you is when you want them to do something differently, that does not lend itself to happiness. Be proactive in building as much positive connection as possible, so that if something hard does come up, the relationship has resilience to deal with it.
- Are you making assumptions about how this person is or why they do things a certain way? Be open to revising your opinions. Get curious about what's happening for them.
- Use discernment in timing your approach to help it go well.
- I-statements are recommended.
- Be specific about behaviors and actions, rather than complaining in general or about personality.
- If someone is able to acknowledge a negative pattern in their behavior, the next question you ask might be: "How can i be your ally in shifting that pattern?"

Receiver

- Acknowledge the other person's experience. Use reflective listening.
- Respond to the truth in what someone else says, rather than the part you disagree with.
- Take a deep breath if you need to, tell them you want to think it over before responding.
- Look for common ground.

Email & Online Communication

The world has changed and text-only communication is now super common. It's easy, it's fast, and it can get you into big trouble if you are not mindful.

Recommended uses include:

- community-building (borrowing items, ridesharing, etc.)
- announcements
- factual information
- posting agendas
- minutes distribution
- logistics
- background research & documents
- sending out drafts of proposals

It typically does not work well for:

- upset feelings
- resolving interpersonal tensions
- personal feedback about each other's behavior—unless you know the recipient prefers that
- discussions with significant emotional content
- revising proposals if there is emotional charge
- sarcasm

Other things to keep in mind about using email and other online messaging:

- like any format, there are biases; for example, textual communication privileges fast readers and typists, which often includes people who are more verbally articulate and express themselves in a linear way
- remember that some people check messages often, others occasionally, others not at all
- when you hit a snag, go up a notch in communication mode (e.g., from email or text to phone to video to in-person)

Further Resources

"Avoid The Seagull Effect: The 30/60/90 Framework For Feedback" https://blog.trello.com/avoid-the-seagull-effect-30/60/90-feedback-framework

"Dealing with Conflict: Reflection, Feedback, and Third Party Support" www.treegroup.info/library/conflict/

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. (1999) Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen. Clear information, variety of realistic examples—Tree's favorite book on conflict resolution, highly recommended,! Penguin, $14.00.

"Innerwork: Working on Your Issues with Someone (Whether or Not They Come Along)" www.treegroup.info/library/innerwork

Nonviolent Communication (known as NVC, or sometimes as Compassionate Communication): a popular framework pioneered by Marshall Rosenberg. Oregon Network for Compassionate Communication has a website with local practice groups, classes, and so on at www.orncc.net.