



Nicole Abi-  
Esber

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## Why you should give more feedback – It's wanted more than you think

0 comments

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Have you ever come home from a busy day and realized you had something on your shirt, and no one told you? Or maybe you were mispronouncing someone's name, but no one corrected you until confidently mispronounced it to their face.

Have there been instances where you should have been the one to correct someone, like when you saw a colleague with a clear error in their presentation, but you let them present their mistake to the senior leadership team?

The difference in how we feel in both examples is the core of our research question: why do we want feedback so much for ourselves, but we are hesitant to give it to others?

## Why do we hesitate to give others constructive feedback?

Research tells us people avoid giving feedback for two main reasons, either they don't want to hurt someone's feelings or embarrass them, or they don't want to be the bearer of bad news.

However, what if there was another reason that people don't give feedback? The possibility that people may **underestimate the value of feedback** for other people was explored by Dr Nicole Abi-Esber, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour in the Department of Management, and her co-authors in their **recently published research**.

To test how much people received feedback versus how much they actually wanted it. Dr Abi-Esber and her colleagues conducted a series of experiments.

## Would you tell someone if they had a mark on their face?

Firstly, a research assistant was sent around a busy university campus with a mark on their face, which was either chocolate, lipstick, or a pen mark. They approached students, asking them to participate in a survey, but they were really counting how many people would tell them about the mark on their face.

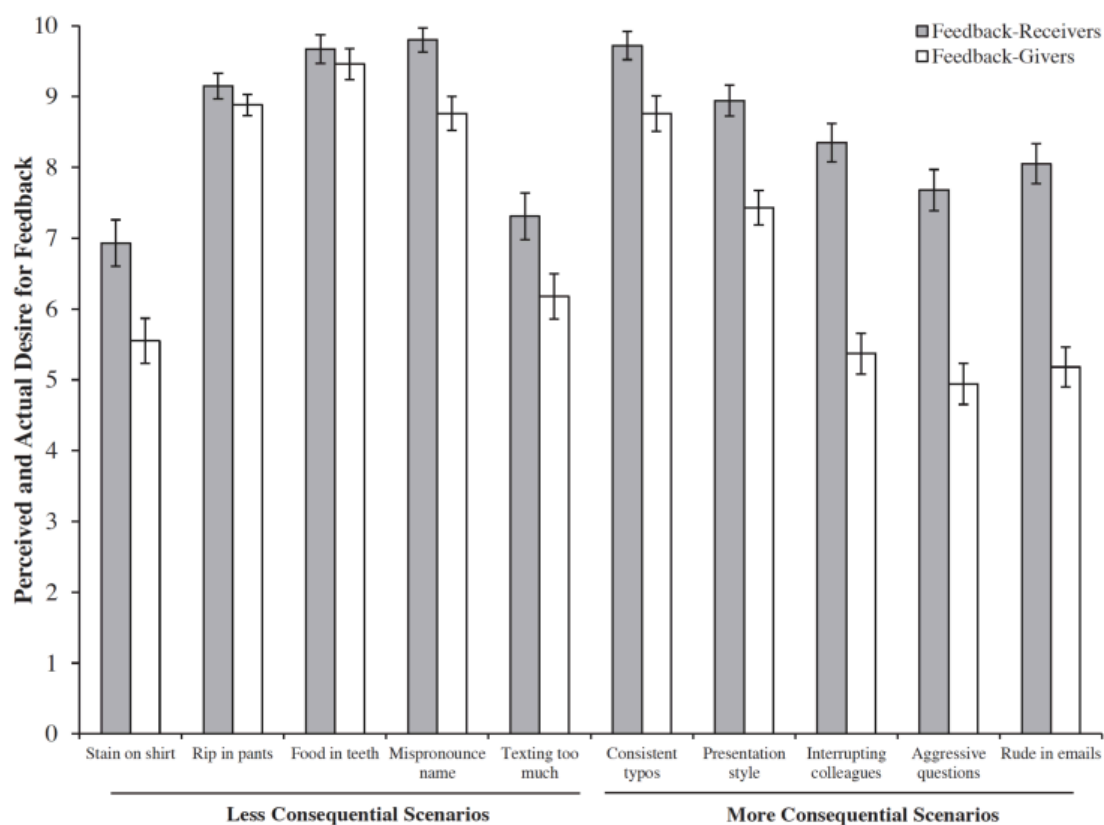
Interestingly, of those who admitted to noticing the mark, less than 3% mentioned it to the researcher. When asked why, 40% stated they thought the researcher wouldn't want to know, 37% commented that it wasn't their business, and 23% said they were, or thought the researcher

was, too busy. This revealed that people may be underestimating how much other people want feedback.

In a second experiment, participants were randomly assigned to be either a feedback-giver or feedback-receiver and told to imagine themselves in a workplace scenario. These scenarios varied in consequentiality, from just having a stain on their shirt on the low end, right up to being rude to a colleague.

In almost every single situation, people assigned to be the feedback-giver clearly underestimated the feedback-receivers desire for feedback. The more consequential the situation, the more people underestimated the desire for feedback.

*Predicted and Actual Desire for Constructive Feedback in Experiment 1*



*Note.* This figure shows feedback-givers' predicted and feedback-receivers' actual desire for constructive feedback across 10 workplace scenarios in Experiment 1. Givers systematically underestimate receivers' desire for feedback. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

The third experiment gauged the feedback gap between people with close relationships, such as close friends, roommates, or romantic partners, touching on more personal issues, such as exercise and eating

choices. The study found that even when the participants knew each other well, feedback givers still underestimated how much their feedback was wanted.

In the fourth experiment, a financial incentive was introduced to test if a monetary reward would affect the willingness to provide feedback. One participant was assigned as the speaker, with the chance to win \$100, the other participant was assigned to give them feedback on their speech, with the chance to earn \$50 if their partner won a speaking competition.

Even with the chance win cash, participants continued to underestimate how much their partner would want their feedback. Nonetheless, this experiment revealed the value of constructive feedback, as those speakers who did receive more constructive feedback, did better in the final competition.

## How can we recognise our feedback is wanted?

In the fourth study, two possible interventions in the feedback process were tested with the intention of increasing the likelihood of feedback being offered. Firstly, participants were asked to put themselves in the shoes of the feedback receiver before predicting how much feedback was wanted. In the second intervention, participants were asked to imagine someone else, not them, would be giving the feedback.

Both interventions, made feedback-givers more accurate in predicting how much their feedback would be wanted, helping to close the gap between feedback-givers and feedback-receivers. Imagining oneself in the shoes of the feedback-giver was particularly effective.



*Briefly imagining how much you would want the feedback if you were the feedback-receiver might help you realize how much the feedback is wanted and may make you more likely to give it.*



## Give feedback to others

Think back to the examples at the start, mispronouncing someone's name, or walking around with a stain on your shirt. We know that if it was us, we would want feedback.

If you find yourself in a situation to give feedback to someone else, and you are hesitating about whether to give it, try imagining yourself in the shoes of the other. This might help you realise how much your feedback might be wanted and make you more likely to give it.

You could save that colleague from an embarrassing mispronunciation or an error in a presentation and contribute to a culture of constructive feedback.

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*This blog is based on the paper “Just letting you know ... ”*  
*Underestimating others' desire for constructive feedback.* (2022) Abi-  
Esber, N., Abel, J. E., Schroeder, J., & Gino, F. Published in the *Journal of*  
*Personality and Social Psychology.*

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## About the author



**Nicole Abi-Esber**

Dr. Nicole Abi-Esber is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour in LSE's Department of Management. Dr Abi-Esber holds a PhD in Organisational Behaviour from the Harvard Business School. Her research examines how leaders can create climates of safety and inclusion, where everybody feels safe to speak their mind.



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