Nicole Abi-Esber December 18th, 2024

You may not know it, but people crave feedback

Research tells us that people avoid giving feedback because they don't want to hurt someone's feelings or embarrass them. Another possibility is that they don't want to be the bearer of bad news. ***Nicole Abi-Esber*** *writes that there's a third reason at play: people may underestimate how much others value feedback.*

Have you ever come home from a busy day and realised 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 you 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 we hesitate

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 people don't give feedback?
In a published paper with my co-authors, I explored the possibility that people may underestimate the value of feedback for others.
We conducted a series of experiments to test how much people received feedback versus how much they actually wanted it.

Someone 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 three per cent mentioned it to the researcher. When asked why, 40 per cent stated they thought the researcher wouldn't want to know, 37 per cent commented that it wasn't their business, and 23 per cent 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.

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 received more constructive feedback did better in the final competition.

Recognise feedback is wanted

In the fourth study, two possible interventions were tested with the intention of increasing the likelihood of feedback being offered. First, 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 receivers. Imagining oneself in the shoes of the giver was particularly effective.

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

Give feedback

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 may 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 criticism.

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- *This blog post is based on the paper "Just letting you know … " Underestimating others' desire for constructive feedback, by Nicole Abi-Esber, Jennifer E Abel, Juliana Schroeder and Francesca Gino, in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.*
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