

Guidelines for Practicing Ongoing Regard

Additional Perspective on Positive and Constructive Feedback

The Big Idea

Ongoing Regard (the most potent form of “Positive Feedback”) is a ‘speech act’ that can have a powerful effect on your relationships. When you practice Ongoing Regard, you direct attention to specific behaviors of another person, those behaviors that positively impact you or that you admire or are learning from. Ongoing Regard conveys key information that is usually otherwise missed, certainly when using the more widespread ‘speech acts’ of praise or flattery. By expressing genuine regard in a straightforward and effective way, you are ‘making deposits in the relationship account’. This increases your likelihood of being heard when you give “negative” or Constructive feedback, and can therefore create a better context for leading, performance coaching and resolving interpersonal conflicts.

The Benefits of Ongoing Regard vs. Praise & Prizes

Leaders and managers who understand human performance want to boost morale and tap into people’s motivation. The most common approach to doing this is to Praise good behavior and award Prizes. Praise and Prizes are much preferable to no appreciation. However, they can have limitations or unintended consequences. For example, our default approach to praise doesn’t inform the recipient of specifically what they did that had a positive impact – precious information that allows individuals and teams to identify and reinforce best practices. It can also sound ‘canned’ and not very authentic or personal. Prizes on the other hand, automatically create winners and losers, and the perceived value of a prize may be diluted the more frequently it is bestowed.

Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey at Harvard developed a practice they call **Ongoing Regard** that is much more effective and, unlike “Prizes and Praising” has no negative side effects. Ongoing Regard is a different way of giving positive feedback that is more specific, direct and genuine than praising. Ongoing Regard has a greater impact when practiced by everyone on a team, not just the leader. To generate ongoing regard you must shift from exclusive ‘problem’ focus and attend to what people are doing right, to what actions are creating desired results. This change in attention shifts a person’s inner state, and the state of those around them, decreasing Drama Triangle dynamics. Noticing and naming another person’s positive impacts on you also lowers their perception of your self-orientation – another powerful trust builder (see the Trust Equation). But the leader must typically introduce and model this way of speaking in order for it to be fully adopted into a team’s culture. Here are some common benefits to practicing Ongoing Regard:

- Brings to light precious information about WHAT WORKS and reinforces specific behaviors that are valuable
- Makes ‘deposits’ in ‘relational bank accounts’ that are needed when snags arise and withdrawals are necessary (that is, it helps keep ‘relationship accounts’ in the black)
- Infuses the team with energy, builds mutual trust and respect
- Lets people know you are paying attention and encourages everyone to “catch each other doing something right.”
- Ongoing regard, unlike prizes, does not create winners and losers, and does not lose value when used frequently
- Has transformational potential for both speaker and person being regarded.

The Language of Ongoing Regard is Different from Prizes and Praising

Ongoing regard is **Direct**, **Specific** and **Non-Attributive** (that is, I tell you how you affect me and us rather than telling you how you are.) In contrast, when we give prizes or praise people we most often use language that is indirect, nonspecific, and confers attributes on the person we are addressing:

"I want to recognize Jan for her hard work and dedication. She's a rock star! She is always so willing to pitch in and help. So, let's give a round of applause to our January employee of the month!"

Again, such praise is not bad, and it is way better than NOT attempting to give positive feedback. But it is less than optimal in three ways.

First of all, attributive communications ("*Jan, **you are** so hard-working and dedicated!*") are, however unintentionally, presumptuous. In such ordinary praising we entitle ourselves to say who and how the other person is ("*This is your shape.*") The person may well disagree with your attribution and feel uncomfortable, or even attempt to correct the record ("*Oh, no, I'm not really always so ____.*")

We bypass this resistance and have a more powerful impact if we limit ourselves to expressing our own experience, and do so in a direct and specific way: ("*Jan, I appreciate the way you support our managers when they have to travel. For example, you made time in your schedule last Thursday to bring me up to speed. As a result, I felt really well-prepared to run the vendor meeting Friday.*") This simple rearrangement means the person on the receiving end of Ongoing Regard can relax. There is no need to correct the record because they are not being told how they are – they are being told how you experience them.

Let's take another example. If I tell Tom, "*I learned a lot from watching you answer the customer's challenge on pricing in that meeting*" he is unlikely to feel the need to respond to with "*No, really, I don't think you did!*" But if I had praised him in a typically indirect, nonspecific and attributive way - "*Tom was really great in that meeting*" - he might start thinking of what he wished he had done better and feel uncomfortable. Even more importantly, conventional praising speech would not have brought to light the valuable information about what was particularly useful to me about Tom's actions in the meeting. Because I made the effort to be specific and non-attributive, we may have identified a way to overcome a common customer objection that every sales professional on the team should be informed of.

How to Practice Ongoing Regard

Practice the following guidelines to start upgrading the quality and impact of your communications today.

- **Be Direct:** Deliver appreciation or admiration by speaking directly to the person, even when in a group setting ("*Joan, I noticed how you...*" vs. "*Joan really deserves a hand for being so darned...*")
- **Be Specific:** Give the other person the opportunity to understand the how and what of the actual difference that he or she makes to you by using 'video-talk' language that describes their actions ("*Chad, the feedback you gave me after the presentation really helped me put the booing and tomato-throwing in perspective*" vs. "*Chad was such a life-saver after last week's disaster in Darrington...*")
- **Be Non-Attributive:** Express your own experience rather than characterizing the other person ("*I appreciated your heads up this afternoon*" vs. "*You are always on the ball*")

So the stem sentence, or simplest expression of this communication goes like this...

Direct: **Jane,** (address the person directly by name)
Specific: **when you ...** (say what they did or said)
Non-Attributive: **I ...** (describe what you experienced, appreciated or respected)

Example #1: (Spoken during a team meeting). *Jack, you followed up with Pillager and Burns last week and repaired a customer relationship I thought we had lost for good. I hadn't considered offering an extra site inspection as a "make-good" but it really worked – you not only made them feel good about us but you gathered information that we can use to build a more targeted offering. I'll use that in the future, thanks.*

Example # 2: (Spoken to a colleague in front of their supervisor). *Christina, I really appreciate the way you spoke with that upset customer. He wasn't able to see why I couldn't do what he asked until you explained it that way. Thank you!*

Example # 3: (Spoken to a boss.) *Ben, I want you to know how much impact your message to the team last week has had. People were really worried about what we might lose until you laid out the plan – boom, boom, boom - that way. This week people are back to enjoying our work and not fretting about the future.*

How to Practice Constructive Feedback – Filling Blind Spots and Deconstructing Unhelpful Stories with Less Drama

Research shows that sustaining a 5 to 1 or greater ratio of genuinely appreciative communications to communications that are experienced as negative/critical is extremely powerful in building, deepening and sustaining relationships. The amount of Constructive feedback (commonly called “negative” feedback) that can be tolerated without harming a relationship is not an absolute quantity – it is proportional to the amount of genuine Ongoing Regard. Relationships where little O.R. has been exchanged have low reserves and are easily bankrupted by honest negative or Constructive feedback. Relationships where O.R. is genuine, frequent and powerful are extremely resilient and can stay ‘in the black’ despite considerable Constructive feedback.

In short, **earn the right to give feedback that is hard to hear** by making sufficient deposits of Ongoing Regard, and by building real trust based on honest appreciative communication. If this is approached as a trick or a manipulation it won't work (“...let's see, two more compliments and I can blast him with what I really feel!”)

Use the same FORM (with additions) to give Constructive Feedback effectively

By practicing the following guidelines you can start upgrading the quality and impact of your communications today. The following sequence works well to work through ‘snags’....

- **Be Direct:** Deliver constructive feedback by speaking directly to the person. Do so in a group setting only after weighing the purpose, pros and cons of doing so. Consider the group culture and the person's mindset (Green and Orange cultures sometimes OK, Blue cultures most likely not OK, Red cultures may hear constructive feedback as a challenge – “fighting words”).
- **Be Specific:** Give the other person the opportunity to understand the actual impact they have had by using ‘video-talk’ language that describes the specifics of their speech or actions. (“*Bob, twice in the last month you have agreed to provide free service upgrades to Ballbuster Inc. after*

fees were settled and contracts signed...” vs. “*Bob, you’ve been letting Ballbuster Inc. steal us blind...*”)

- **Be Non-Attributive:** Express your own experience rather than characterizing the other person. State your conclusions as a perspective (my interpretation of the data) rather than speaking in a way that sounds like you believe your perception is exhaustive and infallible. Take a Learner rather than a Knower mindset. You are sharing data from your perspective – and your perspective may be missing some data. By speaking to what you can see and know (their behavior and your own mind) rather than attributing motives to their behavior you vastly decrease the likelihood of being perceived as a Persecutor and triggering defensiveness ... (“*I am not sure why you decided to do this, but from my point of view there is very little upside and a big downside.*” vs. “*You are such a push-over. There is no excuse for this. Just because it’s easier to say yes doesn’t make it OK.*”)

Choice Point (stop or continue):

If the feedback creates significant ‘cognitive dissonance’ (varies a lot from the person’s existing perception of their behavior and its impact) it will probably take some time for them to fully absorb the new information - to process it *emotionally* as well as intellectually. It is wise to **allow for processing before pressing for action**, unless circumstances dictate a need for immediate action. Sometimes the conversation is over at this point because one party simply wanted to be heard and understood by the other, and to have the feedback taken into consideration.

Sometimes an immediate **Creator response** will be given to the constructive feedback (ranging from an apology to an offer to act differently next time to questions about what would work better). Sometimes the conversation is over at this point because the party giving feedback simply wanted to be heard and understood by the other, and to receive the apology or promise that has been forthcoming. Less positively, the feedback may trigger a **Victim reaction** such as a denial, excuses, martyrdom or ‘counter-attack’ (Drama Triangle dynamics). In this case, a ‘cooling off’ period may be the best choice.

However, **Constructive Feedback often opens a new door that can lead to deeper dialogue and innovative solutions**. If feedback has opened new perspectives, or agreement on action going forward needs to be reached, the following guidelines can be helpful.

- **Inquire and Discuss (a.k.a.-check out your data and story):** Ask for the person’s response to your feedback; be genuinely curious about their experience and their perspective on what you have said. To put it in ILP-speak: You have shared your Story and the Data at the base of your own Ladder. Now ask them to share the Data, Assumptions and Beliefs that led to the Behaviors you gave them feedback about.

If they offer excuses (taking a non-responsible Victim stance) you don’t have to ‘let them off the hook.’ Skillful Challenging helps people walk down their own ladder of inference: “*So you felt you had no choice but to comply because they would end their contract with us if you didn’t? Did anyone explicitly threaten to do that?*” While Persecution triggers people to defend their conclusions and attack back: “*There is no reason to do what you did, we can’t afford to be handing out discounts like this every time a customer whines (what is wrong with you?).*”

Maintaining an attitude of compassion and curiosity will not only enhance the learning your feedback will generate for them – it will make it possible for you to learn as well... “*Tell me about how this happened; help me understand why it made sense to you to do that.*” vs. “*I don’t want to hear excuses, just admit you were wrong!*”

- **Negotiate Change (a.k.a. dialogue leading to effective requests and action commitments):** Having gamefilmed the situation from both of your perspectives, you are now in a position to

collaborate on defining a different way of acting in the future that would better serve both your interests. To avoid getting stuck, be careful about jumping to advocating for specific solutions that create an unnecessary either / or, right / wrong frame (“*We have to say NO!*” OR “*We have to discount services to keep this customer!*”) Instead, brainstorm from interests first to identify creative solutions (*It is important to keep costs down; AND you want to keep this customer – how can we do both?*). Often, this kind of transparency spawns innovative solutions that meet the needs of both parties but would otherwise have remained hidden behind an argument over mutually exclusive approaches to satisfying differing needs.

- **Confirm Common Understanding (a.k.a. making sure you have committed action promises, with conditions of satisfaction clarified):** At this point, if you have defined a change that meets both of your interests, make sure that a clear summary of the agreement reached is explicitly acknowledged by all parties. This last step is vital to avoiding mistaken assumptions.

Be aware that if the behavior you gave feedback on is a strong habit for the person it will have momentum. Even a genuine conscious commitment does not guarantee the behavior will not recur. Don’t be naïve, assess and set realistic expectations so you can build a sturdy path to success.

If appropriate, name a time to check back in on the issues and any commitments made.