

**Laura PAVIN:** Hey guys, it's Laura Pavin — Kellogg Insight's Multimedia Editor. Before the episode starts, I wanted to invite you to call us with YOUR questions about navigating the office, its politics and its people. Are you worried the team you manage doesn't take you seriously enough...and want to know how to change that? Got a colleague that's dragging the rest of the team down, but you're worried it's not your place to say something? Trying to decide if becoming a manager is the right move for you? Call us, text us, or leave us a message at 847-859-9534. We'll try to find a faculty member who can answer your question on the podcast or in a different form. We can't wait to hear from you!

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[intro]

**Laura PAVIN:** Ellen Taaffe remembers this one time...she was in a virtual meeting with a bunch of people...And someone caught her eye.

**Ellen TAAFFE:** And I saw a woman in the midst of the meeting share an update on some of the work that she was doing, but while she was sharing, she unconsciously was braiding her hair and it was very distracting.

**PAVIN:** Ellen Taaffe is a clinical assistant professor of management and organizations at Kellogg. One of the things she teaches about is how to give and get good feedback. So, after the meeting, she acted.

**TAAFFE:** I shared with her, "you had great perspective you were sharing. I also saw you braiding your hair and I could see other reactions looking almost quizzical. And I am concerned that not only was it distracting for the meeting, but I think it could underestimate how great you really are."

**PAVIN:** It was uncomfortable. Taaffe felt bad about it.

And then...as time passed...the woman improved. She focused on the camera. She didn't fidget. She understood that people could hear what she had to say...a lot better...when she allowed her words and delivery to stand alone.

**TAAFFE:** She is so much more than she showed in that moment.

**PAVIN:** Taaffe says that's what good feedback does. It helps someone improve.

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**PAVIN:** Welcome to The Insightful Leader, I'm multimedia editor Laura Pavin. Giving feedback is hard. And now, with more people working remotely, there's a lot more room for miscommunication. Computer screens have that effect...they strip out a lot of the nuance you need to handle people with care. This episode, Kellogg professor Ellen Taaffe tells us how to create a work culture — remote or in-person — where people aren't just receptive to feedback. They'll expect it. And though it may seem scary, we'll also hear how to give feedback UP the foodchain...because managers need feedback too!

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**PAVIN:** So...what SHOULD feedback look like these days? I called up Taaffe to ask her.

And she said that one of the biggest keys to giving good feedback is timing. Ever had someone say “do you have a second to talk?” after you KNOW you’ve done something wrong? It feels pretty bad. Don’t be THAT manager. Instead, try giving feedback...all the time.

**TAAFFE:** Getting in the habit of giving feedback on a regular basis—it’s after a staff meeting or it’s after the project review or something that’s happening on a regular basis—is the best way. You’re modeling and practicing a culture of just continuously trying to get better. And it’s not that sort of episodic, “oh, no. What does this mean? I’m about to hear something I don’t want to hear.”

**PAVIN:** When feedback is part of a regular routine, you’ve made it part of your culture. And that’s good because, that way, people don’t feel as down on themselves or hurt by you when you tell them they could be doing something differently. Think of it as exposure therapy: More exposure to feedback makes it feel less scary. So make it part of what you and your team just...do!

And that kind of feeds into Taaffe’s next point, which is...don’t wait too long to talk to someone about a problematic behavior. Keep it timely.

**TAAFFE:** Otherwise it’s harder to remember what happened. You don’t want to get into a debate over, “well, you said this, and then she said this, and then he said this.”

**PAVIN:** Take too long to pester...and it’ll fester. Or something like that. Waiting a while to give someone a note will make it feel like you’re coming out of left field with some mean-spirited criticism. Or it’ll make the person think “wait, you’ve been thinking about this one specific thing I did for weeks??” It’s unfair and uncomfortable.

I know what THAT feels like.

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**PAVIN:** I remember when I was just out of college. Working for a staffing agency. And after six months, my manager called me into his office.

“Laura, where do you see yourself at this company?”

“A sales manager.” I replied.

“Really?” he said.

And then I was fired.

I never saw it coming. He gave me no serious feedback before this. It actually affected me for years after....because it made me question everything I thought I knew about what managers actually felt about me and my work. I thought that, if they didn’t like my performance, they would just silently let it simmer until one day...they couldn’t take it anymore, and cut the cord.

Don't make people feel like that. Check-in with people at regular intervals and address issues head-on...before it's too late.

Another hallmark of good feedback is that it is clear and easily understood by the person receiving it.. Clarity is KEY here.

One sure way to muddy a message...is to be too nice about it.

**TAAFFE:** I think that sometimes on our way to trying to be nice and fair and not insulting to someone, sometimes we're not clear. You may want to think, "was I clear on what getting to a different place would look like to make sure that you've delivered it and then make sure that they've heard it?" So you also could, at the end of a discussion, ask them, "what do you take away from our conversation as a way to hear what they heard?"

**PAVIN:** So be more direct. That doesn't mean you should be mean. Just don't sugarcoat your message with things like "it's not a big deal" or "you don't need to do this right this second, but..." And if you really aren't sure this person is getting the message, have them recap the steps you've laid out for them...it could be a quick way to figure out what's getting through to them...and what's not.

Here's another way to make sure your feedback is clear: If you can't do it in person, try to do it over the phone or on a video call:

**TAAFFE:** The more you can see faces and expressions and even hear voices, the better you can understand how it's being received. That's far better than feedback that is on email or slack. That is very much one way and open to interpretation.

**PAVIN:** Text alone can mute your feedback and feel kind of harsh if you aren't careful. So keep it face-to-face...or at the very least, make sure it's a spoken conversation. But if the written route is your only option, Taaffe says to stick with words...and words, alone.

**TAAFFE:** I think overuse of too many emojis or exclamation points may miss the point.

[music]

**TAAFFE:** If you're trying to give some sort of corrective feedback, it might be an opportunity to think about "what's my intention here: to soften the blow of, I'm really saying 'you have more work to do on this presentation?'" It may not be delivering the clear message that you think it is.

**PAVIN:** Emojis and too much punctuation can cloud your real message. And that lack of clarity could cause someone to keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

Okay, so good feedback is clear as day to the person on the receiving end of it. Which is why you'll want to be direct...and not so nice that you obscure the message. You'll also want to stick with vocal feedback instead of written. If you do have to do it in writing, avoid emojis. And try to keep the exclamation points to a minimum.

Now, if you've given someone feedback...you'll need them to do something with it...obviously. That's why you need to make it specific and actionable.

**TAAFFE:** It helps someone put their behavior in context on what they can do to get better, to get to a different place in their job, in their impact and in their career.

**PAVIN:** Don't just tell someone they need to improve. Tell them HOW to improve. Maybe that means some extra training or you help them set better goals. Give them a path to a solution.

If you have to do this a lot and the person still doesn't change...Taaffe says it's time for a different kind of talk.

**TAAFFE:** Ask questions about what's going on for them. It could be, they need some training, it could be a motivation thing. It could be as simple as they're not checking their work. But I also think you need to, depending on the severity of the issue is, reinforcing that you've shared this feedback several times and you're not seeing progress, "let's figure out what else we can do, because I also think that this is going to hurt the team or hurt the project or what is what's at stake here?"

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**PAVIN:** Taaffe says telling people what the stakes are can sometimes be enough for them to change. Or...it could suggest that maybe they're in the wrong job...which could be a good heads up for them to prepare to find a new job...one where they CAN thrive.

[music break]

**PAVIN:** There ARE times when this whole script is flipped...and you have to give your own manager feedback. Maybe they're working people into the ground and no one wants to say anything. YOU want to say something. Before you go ahead and do that, Taaffe says you should consider what's on the line. Are employees disengaging or leaving because of what this manager is doing — or not doing? Are they micromanaging you to the point where you feel like you can't properly do your job? If that's the case, those are some pretty high stakes...and yeah, maybe you should say something.

**TAAFFE:** Summon your courage and plan your conversation. One way to help that is to share why it would help them.

**PAVIN:** Taaffe says to present a solution that's also a solution for your manager. So, if you're being micromanaged, frame it this way:

**TAAFFE:** Like, "I really love to work independently or I really feel valued when you include me in leadership team meetings. Can we talk about what it would look like if I join those meetings or had the opportunity to present at those meetings?" So that you're sharing what's important to you, but also what's the benefit for them. So do they get more time to do everything else on their plate?

**PAVIN:** Make it work for both of you, and you've got yourself a win-win.

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**PAVIN:** There is nuance to all of this. Not all good feedback fits neatly within the lines we've just drawn. Take Taaffe. She remembers a time when someone did something really clever.

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**TAAFFE:** I was a new director on a board and there was a significant area of our work that I did not have industry experience in. I found that in some of these discussions, I clammed up. I felt like I need to play the observer role. And this, this peer, another board director said, I'm dying to know what you think about that, that big launch because I know you know, about brands and would love to hear that applied to this industry...and I took that to mean, he knows that I'm being quiet and he's encouraging me to talk more and I did start to do that.

**PAVIN:** Disguising feedback as a compliment...worked for Taaffe. This feedback reminded her that she was there for a reason. She started speaking up more. And that's because, at its heart, good feedback is rooted in a desire to help someone reach their highest potential. And she felt that here.

That's great! The opposite kind of happened for me...when I gave someone feedback that I was sure would be received well.

I had a colleague that felt comfortable physically poking and nudging me to get my attention...pretty much immediately after she was hired. She didn't have a lot of interpersonal boundaries. I decided to address it. I did that thing where I started off with a compliment before delivering the news that I wanted her to stop poking and prodding me when I was trying to work. I was apologetic and self-deprecating...I said I was a weirdo who didn't even like when people I loved held my hand! I rambled. When I was done talking, she started crying.

I actually explained the whole thing to Taaffe...to see where I might have gone wrong.

**TAAFFE:** My biggest advice would be to get to the point sooner. So the more that you fill in I'm a weirdo or, um, uh, it may just be me. Uh, I think it's simpler to say, I know I'm, I'm absorbed in my computer when you, when you need me, can you just send me a message on slack or wave to me?

**PAVIN:** Taaffe said that I may have made the whole thing feel like a big event...when it could have been just a quick side note right after it first happened...so I could just nip it in the bud right then and there. She said I was also trying too hard to be nice, which, as you know, doesn't send the clearest message. But it's what Taaffe said next that I found really surprising.

**TAAFFE:** You know, to be honest with you, tears are going to happen sometimes. And it just means that something's important to them. And in this case it might be I'm new at a job. And she may be thinking, does everyone think this? And that might, um, you know, that might trigger her feeling of belonging there or feeling like, um, identity. I'm this person who's really close to the people I work with. And you know, so, so that person might jump to a conclusion and the longer you go on, the more, um, that there's a risk of that happening.

**PAVIN to TAAFFE:** Wow!

**PAVIN:** Taaffe kind of hit the nail on the head on the last part...because...yeah, this colleague was new. And yeah, she had told me that she was super close with everyone at her previous

job. A job that she had been working at for years. I had put a giant question mark around her identity. And I could have avoided all that by just getting to the point quicker...and not making it a whole thing.

But if I made it quick and she still cried...it IS a comfort to know that...that happens. And it wouldn't have been because I was careless. It would be because this colleague really cares about her job.

Feedback isn't a one-size-fits-all thing. You have to consider the person you're speaking to, and deliver a message that you know will reach that particular person. Don't beat around the bush, be clear, and deliver a message that feels fresh...not one that hashes out the past.

Do that, and you'll find that it does a lot for morale. At a time when we all need it most.

### **[Credits]**

This episode of The Insightful Leader was written and mixed by me, Laura Pavin. It was produced by Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Emily Stone and Maja Kos. Special thanks to Ellen Taaffe. As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating—that helps new listeners find us. We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of The Insightful Leader.