

## ***The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript*** How to Give Feedback That's Actually Helpful

**Jessica LOVE:** Receiving feedback in the workplace is not easy. Which is why a lot of us have come to rely on the handy “feedback sandwich”: First you say something positive, then something negative, then something positive again. The idea is that by carefully spreading your criticism between two fluffy layers of praise, the whole thing will be easier to swallow. Ellen Taaffe has seen the feedback sandwich served over and over. But in her 30-plus years with companies like PepsiCo and Whirlpool, she says, it’s never struck her as particularly appetizing.

**Ellen TAAFFE:** I would caution people to be careful of using a formula to give feedback. It becomes really blatant and obvious, and people become waiting for that structure, and it’s not really authentic and real.

**LOVE:** So the sandwich doesn’t work. And simply telling it like it is feels cruel. So what’s a leader to do? It’s no wonder that many of us dodge these obstacles by avoiding feedback altogether. But Taaffe says that means depriving ourselves and our colleagues of a powerful mechanism for growth.

**TAAFFE:** In the work environment, we have a duty to give and get feedback. It’s your duty as a manager, but also if you’re managing your career, you want to get feedback. It’s the only way to get better and to get to what you want.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** Welcome to *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast, we’re re-airing a conversation we had a few years ago with Professor Ellen Taaffe. She shares some tips for how leaders can get better at giving and receiving feedback, as well as what you can do if you’re not getting any feedback at all. Producer Fred Schmalz takes it from here.

**Fred SCHMALZ:** After decades in the corporate world, Ellen Taaffe is now a clinical assistant professor of leadership and director of women’s leadership programming at the Kellogg School. She recognizes that a lot of us are pretty reluctant to give feedback, particularly negative feedback.

**TAAFFE:** I believe that most people are afraid to give feedback because they don’t want to come off as mean. They don’t want to be disliked, and they certainly don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. I’ve had to get ready for the tough conversation of giving feedback, and I knew that this was going to be really difficult to receive. Sometimes I’ve even started a conversation with, “This is going to be a tough conversation.”

**SCHMALZ:** She also advises knowing exactly what the other person's career goals are. That way, when you tell people why their performance isn't measuring up, you can frame it as helping them understand what they need to do in order to get where they want to go. It helps, too, to tie the feedback you're giving to your organization's larger goals. That encourages the listener to hear it as objective information, rather than as a personal attack.

**TAAFFE:** The more you can explain objectively what was happening and why it matters for the individual's development, for their career, for the business, the better off you are and they are in being able to understand it and to act upon the feedback.

**SCHMALZ:** The people getting feedback are also more likely to accept it as fair and actionable if they know exactly what your expectations are—and that everyone in that role is being judged by the same standard.

**TAAFFE:** When you're managing a team, and team members are in similar positions or have similar responsibilities, you want to be clear on expectations and your criteria and apply equally across. People want to be treated objectively. If you operate that way, you become a respected leader and manager of others. And then there's no surprises, which is what we all want.

**SCHMALZ:** One way to both soften the emotional impact of negative feedback and make it more helpful is to remember that people's weaknesses are often the flip side of their strengths. For example, the executive who sometimes makes decisions a little too rashly is probably the same one who's great at taking action when necessary. The employee who doesn't speak up enough in meetings is often the same person who's really good at supporting the other members of his team and letting them shine.

So when opportunities for improvement are framed in the context of someone's strengths, feedback becomes a developmental tool, not a marker of deficiency. The message goes from, "Fix your flaws," to "Keep playing to your strengths while you neutralize your weaknesses."

**TAAFFE:** For me, the best feedback that I got was feedback that I received over time as I was moving up in the organization. It was communicated to me in a way that combined the strengths I had with the underlying flip-side of that. For example, I have the personality that is calm in the storm. I'm really good in a troubled situation. I can stay cool in it. I can lead others out of that, but my range of excitability or that kind of thing is limited. I got feedback that, "You really need to elevate your energy and stand-up leadership skills," which was really fair feedback. I'd get all the positives of this: strategic, visionary, calm in the storm, wise, thoughtful. But, boy, did I need to learn how to elevate my style and my energy if I was suddenly communicating to a thousand people in the sales meeting. It was delivered to me in this way that I felt like my boss was rooting for me; really helped me with how do I remain authentic to myself but recognize I'm in a situation where I've really got to step it up with the sales team.

**SCHMALZ:** Another powerful tool for delivering feedback: video. Taaffe remembers participating in a professional-development negotiation exercise that was videotaped. Seeing her actions on film afterwards was eye-opening.

**TAAFFE:** I was in a training session where they put us in a simulated situation where I was along with a partner, negotiating a deal with a group of people. It was all on video. It was one of those crushing things to see yourself on video. It was a bit of, “I’ll take my toys and go home,” which would not have been a good long-term relationship builder with people you have to work with.

**SCHMALZ:** For those on the other side of this equation—people genuinely interested in receiving feedback, whether it’s good or bad—it’s important to note that you don’t need to wait for a training session. The next time a video conference call is recorded, watch it afterwards. Observe yourself in action. And if you’re looking for feedback that’s a little more direct? Just ask for some. Then ask again.

**TAAFFE:** It’s incumbent upon you to make sure you’re asking those questions of your manager or your mentor or your teammates so that you’re getting that feedback, and you’re also communicating that you really want feedback, you want to keep getting better, and you’re open to it.

**LOVE:** This program was produced by Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Emily Stone, and Michael Spikes. It was written by Anne Ford. Special thanks to Ellen Taaffe.

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We’ll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.