

The Feedback Playbook

Ed Schaefer · Version 1.0 · August 2026 · edward-schaefer.com/playbooks/feedback · Free to share

Feedback is supposed to be a gift, in every direction it moves. Giving it well means handing someone something they can actually use, not something they never asked for and can't do anything with. Most feedback doesn't work that way in practice: it's too vague to act on, or it turns up months after the moment it was about, once there's a rating attached to it.

This is three independently complete playbooks under one cover: giving feedback, receiving it, and soliciting it. Most people only ever build a real habit around one of the three, usually giving, and the other two go unpracticed. Each one below stands on its own. Read the one you need today, or read all three once and keep this open as a live reference afterward.

Give feedback

1. The 60-second version

Ask permission first, with the context attached. Describe the specific behavior you saw, not your read on it. Explain the impact. Leave the next move to the other person, unless they're new enough to the work that a couple of starting ideas actually help. Positive feedback follows the same shape, shorter: behavior, impact, keep it up.

2. The default play

Ask permission first, with the context attached: "Hey, there was something in that meeting. Do you mind if I give you some feedback?" Manager Tools is the primary lineage this playbook draws on for giving feedback, and asking first is its opening move. A yes means go ahead. A no means "OK, no problem," and letting it go for now rather than forcing it.

From there, Manager Tools' sequence continues: describe the specific behavior you observed, not your interpretation of it (no "you seemed distracted," only what you actually saw or heard). Explain the impact it had, then close by asking what the person wants to do differently rather than prescribing it yourself. Leadership Explored, episode 7, walks through this same sequence. The Center for Creative Leadership's Situation-Behavior-Impact model covers the same ground and starts by naming the situation itself, a specific moment or context, not something as vague as "last week." From there it adds one more optional move beyond Manager Tools: once impact is on the table, asking about intent ("What were you hoping to accomplish?"). Handle it carefully. It can tip into the other person explaining or arguing their case instead of hearing what was said. If that starts to happen, redirect: "Let's come back to what happened first, then we can talk about why." It should never sound like "why did you do that,"

which reads as an accusation rather than a question. The same shape works for positive feedback, just shorter: behavior and impact, then "keep it up" instead of an open question.

Timeliness matters as much as structure. Gallup's 2021 research, based on more than 13,000 employees, found that people who report meaningful feedback in the past week are far more likely to be fully engaged at work, and people who get feedback daily are 3.6 times more likely to be motivated toward outstanding work than people who only get it once a year.

Calibrate for experience. Someone new to a domain may not yet know what to do differently, so offering a couple of starting ideas can help (Leadership Explored, episode 7). Someone more experienced usually does better with the room left fully open.

3. Where the sources disagree

Not every model behind this playbook agrees, and the disagreements are worth knowing rather than smoothing over.

Ask permission, or don't. Manager Tools treats the permission question as load-bearing, the gate that makes someone ready to actually hear what comes next. Radical Candor doesn't use an equivalent gate: once real care for the person is established, the ceremony can become a hedge rather than a courtesy. Both are defensible. This playbook defaults to asking, because it costs little and protects the moments when someone genuinely isn't ready.

Ask about intent, or don't. CCL's model adds a step Manager Tools doesn't have: asking what the person intended, once impact is already on the table. It closes a real gap in the plain Manager Tools sequence, but the same question can also invite an explanation instead of hearing what was said, which is why the default play above treats it as optional.

A fixed ratio, or not. Radical Candor argues against any fixed ratio of positive to corrective feedback, calling it a formula for insincerity. That can look like it conflicts with leading generously with positive feedback, but it doesn't: a healthy ratio describes a relationship's climate over months, not a script for any single conversation.

4. Scripts

Permission ask:

"Hey, there was something in that meeting. Do you mind if I give you some feedback?"

Yes, give it. No, "OK, no problem," and let it go for now.

An SBI example (composite, for illustration only, never a real exchange):

"In this morning's status update, you cut off two people mid-sentence before they'd finished their point. That meant we moved on without hearing an alternative that might have caught a scheduling conflict earlier. What do you think would help next time?"

If the person is new enough to the work that a starting idea helps, close differently instead: "One thing worth trying next time: agree on a time limit for each person's turn before the meeting starts."

A positive example (composite, same shape as above, shorter):

"In this morning's status update, you asked a follow-up question that pulled out the detail we actually needed instead of moving on. That's exactly the kind of facilitation that keeps these updates useful. Keep it up."

If an intent question helps, once impact is on the table: "What were you hoping to accomplish?" Never "why did you do that."

5. The follow-through loop

One conversation rarely finishes the job. Giving the same feedback more than once is normal, and it doesn't need to escalate into a performance conversation by default.

1. If you notice yourself repeating the same feedback, check your own delivery first: was it specific and clear, and did you actually set the expectation?
2. Then figure out what's actually happening: real resistance, or a genuine misunderstanding of what you were asking for. They call for different responses.
3. Write the agreed next step down, the same day if you can, while it's fresh for both of you.
4. Set a concrete date for the next checkpoint, not "let's revisit this." At the checkpoint, look at the behavior since the conversation, not the original incident again. A large meta-analysis of feedback research, covering more than 600 effect sizes across 131 studies, found that feedback improves performance on average, but more than a third of the time it actually made performance worse, and the throughline in the interventions that backfired was attention shifting onto the person instead of staying on the work (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Re-litigating the original moment is exactly that shift.
5. Tie the checkpoint to a rhythm you already have, like a standing 1:1, rather than scheduling a separate meeting just for this.

6. Failure modes and fixes

Feedback gets hoarded until the annual review. By the time it surfaces, the moment it applied to is long gone, and there's usually a rating attached now, raising the stakes right when there's the least room left to act on it. Fix: say it within days. If it's not urgent enough to say this week, ask whether it's worth saying at all.

Feedback arrives secondhand, relayed from one source, without ever checking the receiver's side. Someone passes along what one other person said, and it never gets checked against anyone else's read or the receiver's own account. Fix: triangulate before relaying it, or send it back to the person who actually needs to say it themselves, directly.

Performative empathy. The giver opens with how hard this is for them and how uncomfortable it makes them, and the moment becomes about managing the giver's feelings instead of delivering something usable. Fix: keep the framing on the receiver and the behavior.

Giver-centered feedback. The content is really about what the giver prefers, dressed up as a note on the receiver's growth. Fix: before delivering it, ask what the receiver gets out of acting on it. If the honest answer is "I'd prefer it," it may not be feedback at all.

All correction, or all compliment. A steady diet of only what's wrong wears a person down. A steady diet of "great job" with nothing underneath teaches nothing. Fix: lead generously with specific positive feedback (the same discipline corrective feedback requires) and attach both to an actual behavior worth naming.

Point an agent at this section to help you prepare to give this feedback: describe the situation, and ask it to draft an SBI opening in your own words.

Receive feedback

1. The 60-second version

The job on this end shifts from delivering feedback well to getting something usable out of it, even when it's poorly given. Breathe, and say thank you regardless of what just landed. Name the type of feedback you think you're hearing (appreciation, coaching, or evaluation) before you react to its content. Go looking for the true part, even a small one. Pull beats push: what you go get is worth more than what happens to arrive.

2. The default play

Three needs sit underneath every piece of feedback, per Stone and Heen's *Thanks for the Feedback*: appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. Most receiving trouble comes from a mismatch between these. Coaching gets heard as evaluation ("you're telling me how to improve, but you really mean I'm not cut out for this"), or there's no evaluation stated at all, so ordinary coaching and appreciation get over-read for a hidden verdict. The single move that helps most: name out loud what type you think you're hearing, and ask if that's right, before you respond to the content.

From there: breathe, and say thank you regardless of what just landed, even when it stings. Leadership Explored, episode 8, works through this same sequence. Go looking for the 10 percent that's true, or even just 1 percent of it, instead of accepting or rejecting the whole thing at once. That gets harder the more personally something lands, and that unevenness is worth being honest about rather than pretending every piece of feedback is equally easy to sit with.

Most feedback arrives incomplete: "this was bad" or "this was good," without much else attached. Getting something usable out of it is partly your job as the receiver. Ask what's missing, the specific behavior and the actual impact. Pause first if you need to. It's fine to say you need a minute rather than reacting on the spot.

3. Scripts

Thank you, then clarify (for a truth trigger, when the content itself feels wrong or unfair):

"Thanks for telling me that. I want to make sure I've got it right. Can you give me an example of when you saw that?" "What I hear you saying is [X]. Do I have that right?"

Naming the type (for a type mismatch):

"Is this coaching, meant to help me improve, or evaluation, meant to tell me where I stand? I want to make sure I'm hearing it the way you mean it."

Separating the conversations (for a relationship trigger):

"I want to separate two things here: what happened, and how this conversation is going. Can we deal with the first one first?"

Buying time (for an identity trigger, when it lands hard enough to need a pause):

"Let me sit with this for a bit and come back to you, rather than reacting right now."

4. Failure modes and fixes

A truth trigger: the content itself seems wrong or unfair. Before arguing, separate where the feedback is coming from (what they actually saw) from where it's going (are they coaching you, or rating you). Treat your own defensiveness as a signal worth noticing, not proof the feedback is wrong.

A relationship trigger: who's delivering it changes whether you can hear it. Two conversations run at once here, what happened and how you're being treated, and they get tangled until you're arguing past each other. Stone and Heen call this switchtracking. Fix: name the two topics out loud and deal with them one at a time.

An identity trigger: the feedback threatens your story about who you are. This produces all-or-nothing swings, "I'm terrible" or "I'm terrific," instead of anything usable in between. Fix: separate what happened from how you feel about it. Then take a second look, on its own, at the story you're telling yourself about what it means for your future. Those three get bundled by default and need to be taken apart on purpose.

A type mismatch. Coaching gets heard as a verdict on whether you're cut out for the work, or ordinary coaching and appreciation get over-read for a signal about where you stand. Fix: ask directly whether the feedback is about how you're doing this, or about whether you should be doing it at all.

Point an agent at this section to help you practice receiving before a hard conversation: describe the feedback you're bracing for, and have it play the deliverer so you can rehearse staying curious instead of defensive.

Solicit feedback

1. The 60-second version

Soliciting reaches what giving and receiving can't on their own: without it, the only feedback you get is what someone else decides to volunteer. Choose who you ask on purpose. Ask about one named, specific thing, never "how am I doing." Listen without defending or explaining. Say thank you, and decide for yourself what to do with what you get.

2. The default play

"Got any feedback for me?" mostly returns nothing, because most people haven't thought about what they'd say and don't know how to say it well on the spot. Two things fix that: who you ask, and what you ask them.

Choose providers on purpose: someone close enough to the work to have actually seen something real, and someone who'll tell you the truth rather than soften it into nothing. It helps to say why you're asking, since giving honest feedback is uncomfortable for the other person too, and knowing your intent makes it safer for them to answer straight.

Then point the request at something specific and named. Bring the attempt you already made where you can: "I'm working on being more concise in meetings. Here's what I tried today. How did it land?" A start/stop/continue question, one at a time, keeps each ask small enough to actually answer. This follows a six-step model that was drafted by someone else, with input from me along the way; it draws on Tom Henschel's *Look & Sound of Leadership*, the Radical Candor blog, and Lyssa Adkins' *Coaching Agile Teams*.

Stone and Heen make the same case from a different angle in *Thanks for the Feedback*: pull beats push, because the person asking controls what gets let in, so the highest-leverage skill to build is the asking, not the answering. Their version narrows to one sharp question, asked often, then "name one thing": pick the single most useful item back rather than waiting for the perfect one.

At team scale, the same logic becomes a written survey: deliberately chosen questions, iterated more than once. Check periodically whether the right people are still being asked, and whether what comes back is still usable.

3. Scripts

Start / stop / continue: - "What's one thing you'd like to see me start doing in [a named area]?" - "What's something I should do less of when it comes to [a named context]?" - "What's something you want me to keep doing with [a named behavior]?"

The one-question version (Stone and Heen):

"What do you see me doing, or failing to do, that's getting in my own way?"

Naming your intention, up front:

"I'm asking because I want to get better at this, not to make myself feel good and not to put you on the spot. Just tell me straight."

Responding to what comes back:

"Thank you, that's useful." Or, one clarifying question only: "Can you help me understand what that looked like?" Then thank you. No defending, no explaining.

4. Failure modes and fixes

The ask returns silence, or what comes back is too vague to use. This usually means the person doesn't yet trust that it's safe to answer honestly. Fix: go back to explaining your intention before asking again, smaller and more specific than the first try.

Contradictory feedback from different people. One person says start, another says stop the same thing. Fix: look for the pattern across people and across time rather than averaging two contradictory data points, and ask a third person the same specific question before deciding which signal to trust.

Point an agent at this section to help you plan your ask: describe who you want feedback from and what you're working on, and have it draft a specific, named-focus question you can actually send.

Ideas worth trying (AI-era)

This sits somewhere in between: further along than a pure experiment, not yet a settled recommendation. Three things worth trying, because they're what's actually in use, not theory.

Rehearse the hard ones. Before a difficult conversation, describe it to an AI and work through the likely reactions ahead of time (Leadership Explored, episode 8). It won't remove the reaction, but it can help you get past your own automatic response and consider the other person's side before you're in the room.

Turn general feedback into specific feedback. When feedback you received doesn't add up to anything actionable, talk it through with an AI, a use also described on Leadership Explored, episode 8, working out what was probably meant and what a next step could look like. It moves feedback from general to something you can actually use. Treat what it comes back with as an informed guess, not a fact: check it against what you actually know before you act on it.

Get a read on yourself from a recording. Feed a recording of a meeting or presentation to an AI and ask what it notices about how you came across (Leadership Explored, episode 8). Only do this with recordings you have consent to share, especially when a colleague or direct report is on the recording too. A rougher, earlier substitute for the kind of feedback a mentor or coach gives by watching you directly.

None of these replace the actual conversation, or a real second opinion from a colleague or a coach.

This is a fit question, not a recipe

The shape above is a strong default across all three directions. Where a specific team or leader actually sits against it, and what that's costing, is what the [Engineering Ways of Working Diagnostic](#) is built to find.