Characteristics of Effective Feedback

1.   It is *descriptive* rather than evaluative. It is important to focus on what the individual did rather than to translate behavior into what he or she is. Thus we might say that a person "talked more than anyone else in the meeting" rather than that he is a "loud-mouth." Avoiding evaluative language reduces the need for the individual to respond defensively.

2.   It is *specific* rather than general. To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "in the conversation that just took place, you did not appear to be listening to what others were saying, and I felt forced to accept your argu-ments." Or, rather than saying "good job" after a student contribution, one might say, "Good job. Your argument was well-re-searched. I liked the way you integrated information from class discussions and read-ings with your own research."

3.   It is *directed toward behavior that the receiver can do something about.* Frustration is increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which he has no control.

4.   It is *well-timed*. In general, feedback is most useful at its earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending, of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.). The reception and use of feedback involves many possible emotional reactions. Excellent feedback pre-sented at an "inappropriate time" may do more harm than good.

5.   It involves the *amount of information the receiver can use* rather than the amount we would like to give. To overload people with feedback is to reduce the possibility that they may be able to use effectively what they receive.

6.   It involves *sharing of information* rather than giving advice. By sharing information, we leave people free to decide for them-selves, in accordance with their own goals and needs. When we give advice we tell them what to do, and to some degree take away their freedom to decide for them-selves.

7.   It is *solicited* rather than imposed. Feed-back is most useful when receivers them-selves have formulated the kinds of ques-tions that those observing them can answer or when they actively seek feedback.

8.   It takes into account the *needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback.* Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It should be given to help, not to hurt.

9.   It concerns *what is said and done* and does not ask "why?". The "why" takes us from the observable to the inferred and involves assumptions regarding motive or intent. It

is dangerous to assume that we know why a person says or does something, or what he or she "really" means or is "really" trying to accomplish.

10. It is *checked to insure clear communication.* One way to do this is to have the receiver try to paraphrase the feedback he or she has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.

11. It is *checked to determine degree of agreement from others.* When feedback is given in the presence of other people, both giver arid receiver have an opportunity to check with others in the group about the accuracy of the feedback. This validation is of value to both the sender and the receiver.

12. It is followed by *attention to the consequences of the feedback.* People who are giving feedback may greatly improve their helping skills by becoming acutely aware of the effects of their feedback. They can also be of continuing help to the recipient of the feedback.

13. It is an important step toward *authenticity.* Constructive feedback contributes to a relationship that is built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern. Such a relationship can open the door to personal learning and growth.