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Providing Feedback Essential for Professional Growth

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This issue of *WMJ* includes several papers that explore various aspects of medical education. For physicians and other health care professionals, however, learning and professional growth continue throughout our careers. A necessary component of this dynamic process is giving and receiving feedback. It not only helps to stimulate learning and uphold professional standards, but it is also one of the most effective ways to improve ourselves and those around us. And given the high stakes and fine margins for error in the medical field, receiving feedback at every stage of one's career is crucial.

The purpose of this editorial is to offer guidance to those working in health care on ways to effectively deliver feedback to peers and colleagues at any point in their career. A future editorial will discuss how to receive feedback.

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

When delivering feedback, focusing on the issues rather than the personalities involved

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Benefits of Effective Feedback

Knowledge expansion

Skill improvement

Leadership development

is essential. It is easier to have difficult conversations and for individuals to differentiate between criticism and feedback when we foster an environment of respect. Understanding the distinction between direct and subtle or soft feedback is important as well. To be most effective, we should be able to balance the two while tailoring our comments to each individual's personality and learning style.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for medical professionals to lack formal training in the art of providing effective feedback and constructive criticism. We have found the following principles to be most beneficial:

- **Structure the feedback:** Giving serious thought to any criticism before voicing it is essential. One must remember that the goal of feedback is to promote learning and development for others and to facilitate problem-solving. Critical feedback should not be a zero-sum activity. Instead, we should aim to ensure that everybody wins. Structure successful feedback by deciding when and where to give it, select-

ing words carefully, and approaching the situation without judgment or bias.

- **Show the impact:** It is important to think about how resolving an issue through feedback will affect those involved and their individual growth. Fixing an issue often requires convincing people to consider how the conflict in question might affect them.
- **Be specific:** Feedback—especially negative feedback—needs to be pinpointed in its concentration and unambiguous in its delivery. Using an indirect, gentle approach may lead to confusion. Conversely, an overly direct method risks being misinterpreted as criticism. It is almost always more beneficial to supply objective data versus subjective information while delivering feedback.
- **Recognize positives:** Even negative feedback should incorporate positive content. One way to help someone improve is by first reviewing their strengths, then discussing areas where they are not as successful. Admire and acknowledge their positive abilities and actions rather than simply criticizing what they have done wrong. When people's strengths are recognized, they are more likely to be receptive to suggestions.
- **Suggest actionable solutions:** Feedback that does not include specific steps to act upon can be misleading and, in many cases,

counterproductive. One should propose concrete, actionable steps that address specific issues at hand, as well as a road map for personal improvement and growth in the workplace. Without goal-oriented solutions and a follow-up plan, the value of feedback can be diminished significantly.

- **Allow explanation:** Recipients of feedback should have the opportunity to explain themselves and also be permitted to express their opinions about the feedback they receive.
- **Conclude positively:** A feedback meeting should conclude on a positive note, regardless of the topic. People remember what was said at the end of a conversation, so finishing on a positive note lets them focus on practical ways to improve and provides more of an incentive for them to act upon the feedback they received.
- **Always keep calm:** Regardless of the severity or nature of the issue, one must stay calm during feedback dialogues. It is crucial for us in the medical field to be able to strike a balance between being explicit

What to Avoid When Providing Feedback

Creating an environment that fosters disrespect

Being judgmental

Providing feedback that is

- overly general,
- overly direct
- overly detailed

Focusing on personality instead of the issue

Giving feedback without

- goals
- actionable items
- a follow-up plan

with our comments and avoiding emotionally charged statements. Remember that feedback is vital for personal growth, and losing one's temper will reduce its effectiveness.

- **Be available:** One should always be willing

to answer questions regarding the feedback they give. This clarifies any doubts or confusion the recipient may have and demonstrates that we care about their success, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be motivated to act.

As medical professionals, when we can successfully provide constructive feedback and work to address our shortcomings, we can create a positive environment where we can learn and succeed together. This, in turn, facilitates leadership development and optimizes the level of care we can deliver to patients.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

The cover of this issue of *WMJ* features a watercolor titled, "The Exquisite Heart" by Kaitlin Walsh. This is the first in what we hope will be a series of reader-contributed artwork on the cover that illustrates the art and science of medicine. Readers are invited to submit works in the following media: photography, digital design, or well-rendered photographs of painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking, or textile/fiber art for consideration for future issues. Visit www.wmjonline.org to learn more.

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