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Coaching Teams . Changing Cultures

Give Compassionate Feedback While Still Being Constructive – By Arianna Huffington

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People want feedback that helps them grow and improve. But how you deliver it matters, too.

Imagine a company where directness is prized above all else. Managers deliver blunt, harsh feedback in the name of efficiency.

Now, imagine another company with a very different culture. Here, directness is nowhere to be found. Managers are accommodating and kind, overlooking mistakes or issues so as not to hurt feelings.

What's the problem with each? The first creates a toxic culture of brilliant jerks that drives people out and eats itself from within. The second ignores issues until they build up and affect business metrics.

We have all seen these companies in the news, as a trending topic or even firsthand. You may be at one now! But it's when we combine directness and compassion that we create a culture in which people can truly thrive at work.

At [Thrive Global](#), the behavior-change tech company I founded, we call this *compassionate directness*. It's our core value — the one that fuels all the others.

Compassionate directness is about empowering employees to speak up, give feedback, disagree and surface problems in real time. But it has to be done with compassion, empathy and understanding. It's what allows us to course-correct, improve and meet challenges while also building teams that collaborate and care for one another.

Of course, you can't just declare you have a culture of compassionate directness. You have to create an atmosphere of mutual trust. When we get feedback from someone we trust, we know our best interests are at heart. We can see that the feedback isn't some kind of personal attack, it's actually a kind of support because it's offered in the spirit of helping us improve. Without an atmosphere of trust, feedback can be a catalyst for stress and self-doubt. If you've ever found yourself puzzling over [what your manager really meant](#), or whether there was some kind of coded message hidden in the feedback you received, it may be a sign that you're not working in an atmosphere of trust.



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How feedback is delivered is one of the most vital — and underappreciated — indicators of a company's success.

People are hungry for feedback that helps them grow and improve. According to a survey by Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy, 92 percent of people agreed that “[negative feedback](#), *if delivered appropriately*, is effective at improving performance.”

But that's a big *if*. A recent [Gallup poll](#) found that only 26 percent of employees strongly agree that the feedback they're getting is helping them improve their work. Poorly delivered feedback makes us disengaged and disempowered. As we see at many hard-charging companies, including hypergrowth brands like [Away luggage](#), directness without compassion can work — until suddenly it doesn't.

In contrast, cultures that value only compassion go off course in another way. Years ago, I worked with a leader who had a habit of giving critical negative feedback padded with so many positives that his direct reports often came away thinking they were getting a promotion. [Studies have long shown](#) that managers have a tendency to soften feedback out of aversion to what they perceive as conflict. When this happens, challenges that should easily be identified and dispatched are instead allowed to take root and fester — and the opportunity to course-correct (“Captain, perhaps we should go around that iceberg”) is lost.

“By presenting subpar performance more positively than they should, managers make it impossible for employees to learn, damaging their careers and, often, the company,” Michael Schaerer and Roderick Swaab, organizational behavior experts, [wrote recently](#) in Harvard Business Review.

It needs to be said: Being told we're missing the mark can be a blow to our ego and even our identity. That's why it's so important to shift our mind-sets around how we receive feedback. Constructive feedback, after all, is how we learn and grow. It's the basis for healthy parenting, lasting friendships, career development and so much more. If we shelter our children, friends and colleagues from information that might enrich and enhance their lives, we're not being caring — we're actually doing them a disservice.

For many of us, especially those of us who have been raised in families or within cultures that encourage indirectness, compassionate directness may seem really hard. Fear holds us back — fear of negative reaction or of rocking the boat. It doesn't just apply to workplace situations. Have you ever agonized over whether to tell individuals they have spinach in their teeth? The same is true for receiving feedback and learning to see it as information we can use to improve instead of letting our negative self-talk take over.

When we flex our compassionate-directness muscle, we'll find that it becomes easier and more natural. And we'll see benefits at work, at home and in our relationships.



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Recently, I received a comment about Thrive's all-hands team meeting continuously starting late. There was a clear reason in that our Leadership meeting, which directly precedes the team meeting, often runs late. And though it may not have been as noticeable in our New York headquarters, the person commenting explained how remote offices and employees felt like their time wasn't being respected as they waited for us to dial in. It was a great piece of feedback that we wouldn't have acknowledged had it not been raised, and it had a simple solution — we now start our team meeting 10 minutes after the hour to make sure that we have time to dial in.

To get started implementing compassionate-directness into your own life, here are some of my favorite related [microsteps](#), which are small, science-backed actions you can start taking immediately to build habits that significantly improve your life.

Give one piece of constructive feedback and let it stand on its own.

Don't undermine your message by padding it with irrelevant positive statements. This might be uncomfortable at first, but research shows that people are hungry for constructive feedback.

Before your next one-on-one, pause to reflect before giving feedback.

If you're stressed or rushed, you're more likely to deliver feedback without compassion or empathy — even if that's unintentional.

When you notice a problem, find a way to surface it immediately.

Don't just hope a problem will go away, or assume someone else will fix it. When you speak up with compassionate directness, everyone benefits.

In your next meeting or one-on-one, consider another person's perspective.

It can be as simple as pausing before a meeting to ask yourself, "Where is this person coming from?" By zooming out, you'll be better able to see others' motivations and understand their priorities.

When you receive constructive feedback, write it down and come back to it later. This will allow you to move beyond the emotion of the moment and consider more dispassionately whether it holds truth for you.

Turn a digital exchange into an in-person conversation.

A lot of nuances of human communication are lost in digital interaction. When you get to know your co-workers as people instead of just names in your inbox, you'll build trust and camaraderie.



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Once a day, have a conversation where you mostly listen.

Don't underestimate the power of your silence. Instead of giving your opinion or changing the subject, invite the other person to go deeper.

