

# An Approach to Developing a Constructive Feedback Culture Among Peers or: Why Feedback is not Criticism

**A whole body is only as good as a single element.**

Desiree Sernau

Der Artikel stellt die Ergebnisse des Tutoriums “Entwicklung von konstruktiver Feedbackkultur unter Peers mithilfe von (Selbst)Videografie” vor. Nachdem einleitend die Bedeutung von Feedbackkultur für zwischenmenschliche Kommunikationsprozesse erläutert wird, stellt die Verfasserin und Tutorin anschließend die Forschungsfragen vor. Im weiteren Verlauf werden die zwei Phasen des Tutoriums beschrieben und Kernbausteine des Tutoriums genannt. Kommunikationstheoretische Aspekte und die praktische Anwendung und Vertiefung dieses Wissens gehen dabei Hand in Hand. Im dritten Schritt wird das im Rahmen des Tutoriums entwickelte Modell zur konstruktiven Feedbackkultur mit seinen drei Dimensionen dargestellt. Am Beispiel der Generalisierung wird aufgezeigt, dass alle drei Dimensionen des Modells miteinander interagieren. Besondere Betonung erhält die Erkenntnis, dass Feedback nicht einfach Kritik ist, sondern vielmehr einer grundlegenden Einstellung – basierend auf einem entsprechenden Menschenbild – bedarf. Der positive Beitrag zur Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und der positive Einfluss auf das Kommunikationsverhalten aller Teilnehmenden sowie die Vorteile der Videografie werden aufgeführt. Abschließend wird betont, dass dieses Modell gruppenspezifisch an den Kontext angepasst werden muss. Im Rahmen eines weiteren Tutoriums soll das Modell versuchsweise in der Lehrer\_innenbildung angewandt werden.

## On the Meaning of Feedback and Feedback Culture

Presenting, teaching, debating – whatever the area, interaction and communication take place everywhere. People want and need to interact with one another in order to achieve individual or organizational goals. Therefore, it can be assumed that people want to communicate successfully. However, often these processes are not successful, stir up irritation and sometimes even result in conflicts. Within the broad field of communication, feedback is an element that can improve individual and group communication patterns. These patterns, though, are only valid for feedback that is based on the willingness to be constructive. Individual and organizational performance will only improve if feedback is constructive.

For this reason it requires comprehensive enhancement of different aspects of interpersonal communication as well as the development of improved feedback criteria. In this context the most important questions that need to be addressed and answered are: What does feedback exactly mean? What implies feedback culture? How and when should constructive feedback be given?

Moreover, what are the constituents of a constructive feedback culture among peers? The term constructive refers to both, the ways in which feedback is given and received, as well as the effects feedback might have on the communicators involved.

## Aspects of Training for Feedback Culture

For an entire semester students of different academic backgrounds focused on these questions. The participants' presentations and the following feedback given by their peers were recorded on video. Afterwards these videos were analysed to develop a useful feedback culture. However, before reaching this stage, all participants spent time on theoretical issues of communication and reflected (on) individual communication patterns, making use of models such as the Four-sides Model of Schulz von Thun, the Jahori-Window by Luft and Ingham, the Iceberg Model or the Concept of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) by Marshall Rosenberg. During the second part of the seminar, which was entirely dedicated to the spirit of enhanced discovery learning, the participants focused on the identification of structural constituents and the development of content-related criteria for giving and receiving feedback. At this stage our work was mainly based on the videos. They actively applied their knowledge of communication theories, thus not only being able to practice but also having the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the theoretical input they had received before. This process was accompanied by several assignments that invited the participants to reflect on their own perception, observations and assumptions.

## Results: A Model for Constructive Feedback Culture and Increased Awareness

In terms of the course results, it is possible to point out two key issues. First of all, formal findings concerning the questions on feedback culture can be presented. Secondly, the participants' capacity for constructive communication improved.

During the process, an approach to constructive feedback culture was developed. Dealing with the question of the whole concept of feedback and feedback culture, we were able to identify three dimensions: the mode, the content and personal competencies (see figure). All three are not detached from each other but instead overlap in many ways. An example might help to illustrate this point: Generalisations are not very helpful. Often, though, it is rather difficult to avoid generalizations when giving feedback. It requires a profound understanding of the content, must stick to predefined criteria, and depends on personal competencies such as empathy or perspective taking skills. "Not sticking" to such criteria and struggling with empathy might lead to generalizations which are neither sensitive (wrt mode) nor useful (wrt content). Consequently, this feedback would not be constructive. In addition to these identified dimensions and criteria the different contexts in which feedback might be given, we also discussed the adaption of criteria with regard to context.

# A Model of Constructive Feedback Culture

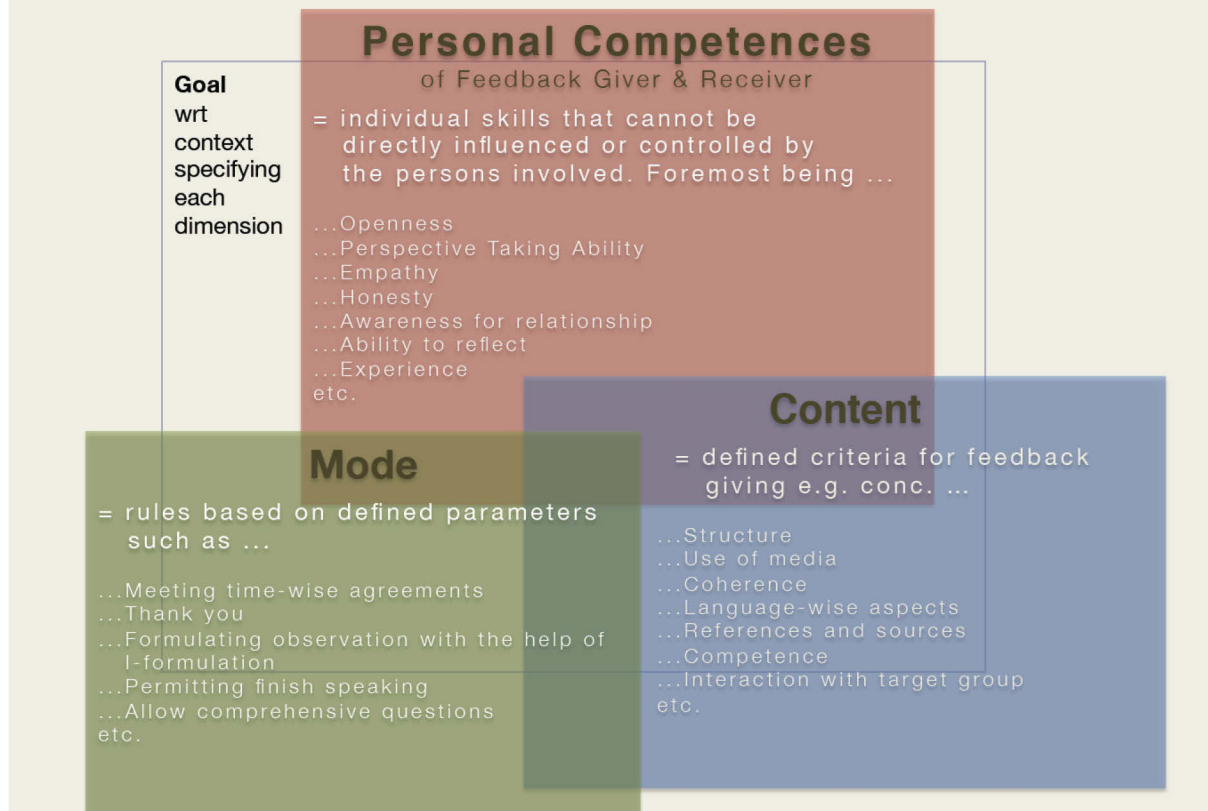


Abb.1: Model of Constructive Feedback Culture.

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One of the core findings was that feedback does not necessarily mean criticizing another person. Feedback and constructive feedback culture are a question of attitude. Constructive feedback is meant to support the receiver, not to impose the feedback giver's values onto them. In practice, this means for example that the feedback giver should put emphasis on observation and the constructive phrasing of these observations. In turn the feedback receiver needs to be able to accept the feedback as a more or less subjective observation of their own performance. The receiver is invited to assess the importance of the giver's feedback for his or her own personal development. He or she needs to find their own position in relation to what has been said. Both participants need to be concerned with the question of responsibility; they should take into account that the exchange of feedback is as much about their own feelings and self-confidence as it is about the recognition of others' feelings and needs.

Frequently rules of feedback are established. These rules should only be applied, though, when they conform to the concept of "constructivism", the most important aspect of feedback culture. Moreover, constructive feedback culture among peers has nothing to do with performance-related evaluation. However, this cannot be easily adapted. It needs to be trained, applied daily and reflected regularly. Hence, as a second output of the course, all participants showed an increased awareness with regard to communication behavior and its underlying dynamics. It can be said that all participants benefitted from the training as far as their communicative capacity to act is concerned. I would like to think, though, that the course also contributed to their lifelong learning. They became aware of the need for rules for constructive feedback and the necessity of determining specific

criteria according to which feedback is given.

## Conclusion and Prospects

During the seminar a model for constructive feedback culture among peers was developed. Video as a micro-teaching method was identified as a useful tool for objective and timeless observation. Furthermore, participants stated helpful insights into their own performance. All participants can benefit from a course dealing with questions of feedback and feedback culture. Regardless of the subject students improve their interpersonal communication patterns and thus contribute towards the avoidance of destructive interaction in daily life. They furthermore experience hands-on how they can improve their own performance. It seems that focus needs to be above all on the enhancement of personal competencies. This is much more important than the mode or content being clarified rather fast. Taking the learning theories of constructivism into account, feedback that is meant to be constructive and thus a concept of feedback culture is only able to develop slowly, over time and, as stated before, with regular training focusing on the reflection of one's own communication behavior. Only if this is the case will the participants benefit.

Feedback culture as a whole needs to be developed in relation to the context. That means that every group needs to develop specific criteria and rules for giving and receiving feedback. However, the theoretical framework that was developed during the course might be helpful to identify and structure the group's need.

In conclusion, the formal training that was performed supports the improvement of general and informal feedback behavior. It enables the transfer to many daily situations, regardless of the context. Constructive feedback culture becomes a significant element of a more general constructive communication culture. Finally, this tutorial enhances the empowerment of single elements and thus contributes to continuous interaction and communication and continual personal growth.

Findings are to be tested and explored in future trainings with focus on teacher trainees. Moreover, it is also planned to present this model in academic teaching courses and schools. Various studies show the need for improved feedback competencies within the teaching environment (e.g. Hosenfeld/ Helmke 2008; Runhaar/Sanders/Yang 2010, Tang/Harrison 2011). With this in mind, the developed model will be reviewed in another seminar focusing on teacher trainees and teaching next winter term 2013/14.

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