



Amy Rees Anderson, Contributor

I share my insights as an entrepreneur turned mentor & angel investor

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Speak The Truth, Even If Your Voice Shakes

When someone isn't performing well at their job; or when they aren't the right fit for a particular position; or when their personality isn't a match for the company culture, one of the biggest disservices you can do to them is to not tell them the truth.

As a CEO, I found that one of the toughest things to teach people that serve in a management role is how to give honest feedback to others. I found that they were often afraid to hurt feelings, or they were afraid of not being liked. Rather than giving direct, honest feedback they would sugarcoat things and dance around an issue. One of my least favorite things they would do is try to pass the problem off to another manager in another department as a way to avoid having to take care of the situation themselves.



For many years, I struggled with how to help people become comfortable in giving honest feedback. It was difficult because I had also struggled to give direct feedback in my earlier years as a [leader](#), so I understood what they were going through and why it was hard for them. But I also knew how important it was for me to teach them to do it, because I had learned firsthand the positive impact that came from learning to tell people the truth directly. I had seen the difference between situations where I avoided telling someone straight up what needed to change, and the times I had been willing to overcome my fears and just put truth out there for the other person to hear.

Throughout this process, I learned seven very important lessons:

1. As a leader you have an obligation to set the example of giving honest and direct feedback to employees. If you don't do it, no one else will either, so it must start with you.
2. Never feel guilty telling someone else the truth about what isn't working or what has to change. They deserve to know it. They cannot change and improve unless they know the truth about what they are doing wrong. You owe it to them to be honest and open.
3. Always give feedback from a position of truly wanting to help the other person

with the information. Never give feedback at a time you are angry or frustrated or you will end up tearing the other person down and no good will come from it. If you enter into the conversation with the genuine desire to help the other person to improve and grow, your heart will be in the right place and your words will come out in a way that builds, not destroys.

4. It is OK to start the conversation by telling the other person that what you need to discuss with them is a little uncomfortable for you, but you also know that it's in their best interest for you to give them honest feedback, so you are going to do your best to do so. This lets the other person know that your intentions are good, and it helps stop them from becoming immediately defensive and allows them to be more open to what you have to tell them.

5. Be very clear in explaining exactly what they need to do differently. Don't just talk in broad, general terms. Give them specific examples of what they have done wrong and then give them an example of how they could have handled things differently. Keep in mind that most people are not trying to mess up or be difficult. They are usually either unaware of their own bad behavior, or they are frustrated because they can't figure out how to do it differently. Typically, they will appreciate having some practical examples that teach them new ways to approach things.

6. Always be honest with respect. If you talk to the other person in a way that demonstrates your respect for them, they will appreciate your words far more, and you will have a far better chance of making an impact with them.

7. Make sure that anytime you are going to share something negative that you also take time to express the positive. Let them know what they do right as well as what they are doing wrong. You want people to walk away knowing that not everything they do is bad, and you want them to recognize the good things they should continue to do.

As a manager, you are speaking to a person who is just as nervous as you are to have the conversation. Recognize that you are in a position to affect their livelihood. That can be nerve racking for the other person, so go out of your way to make it as comfortable a conversation as possible. As you are giving them feedback be sure to ask if there are things you could be doing better as their leader to help them as they are working to improve. Seeking their advice lets them know that you are willing to help them, which creates an atmosphere of trust.

[Leaders](#) have a duty to set the tone with employees that they are allowed to honestly express their frustrations as well, without any fear of retaliation from you, as long as they do so with respect. An employee who feels safe enough to be honest will provide you valuable information on other potential problems in the organization and will give you input on what changes you may need to make in order to become a better leader yourself. I found that I grew the most as a leader when I was willing to ask my employees to give me honest feedback on areas they thought I could improve.

All of us want to be the best we can be, but none of us will get there if we don't help by giving honest feedback. Simply firing an employee without letting them know what they were doing wrong is such a disservice to them because they will likely go on to the next company and repeat those same mistakes. Be respectful enough to tell them how they can correct their behavior so that they can go on to their next job with a higher chance for success. If you remember that you are helping them by telling the truth, it will help you to have the courage to tell them what they need to hear. And if your voice shakes a little – well, that's OK – as long as you don't let it stop you from speaking the truth.

~[Amy Rees Anderson](#) (follow me on twitter at @amyreesanderson)