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I used to show up five minutes late everywhere I went, believing that the universe generally accepted a margin of five minutes. One day a client and mentor named Nancy looked me in the eye and said something in a kind but no-nonsense way: “Part of the image you are projecting to people is that you are always late. Don’t let it get in the way.”

I’ve been five to 10 minutes early ever since.

I have been shaped in part by uncomfortable moments of feedback like this one. When offered with respect, honest feedback — even when critical — can have a major impact on your career and your personal life.

With so much to gain, why don’t leaders have feedback conversations more often? Because not all leaders are comfortable with the responsibility. The fear of hurting people’s feelings and dealing with potential drama and retribution hold us back.

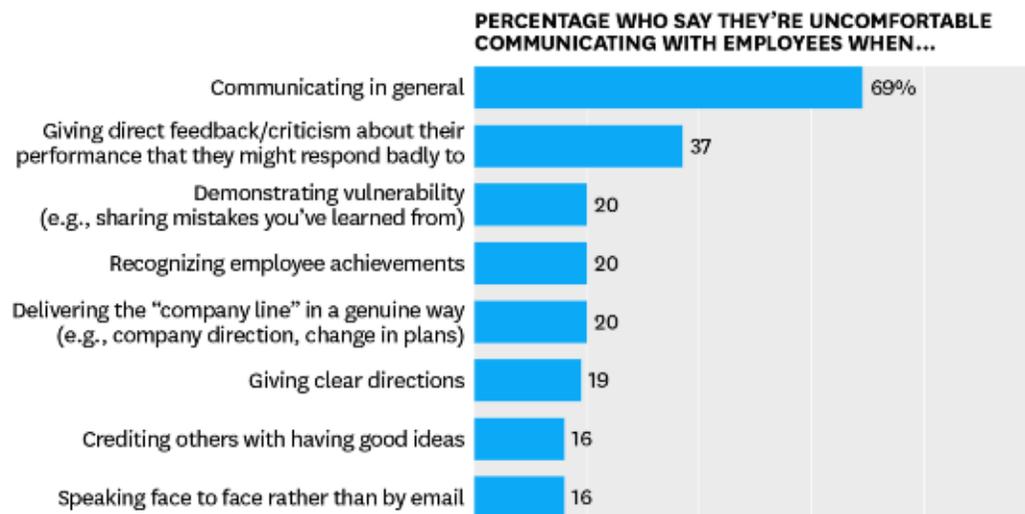
How much of a problem is this, really? A new [Interact survey](#) conducted online by Harris Poll with 2,058 U.S. adults — 1,120 of them were employed, and 616 of the employed people were managers — showed that a stunning majority (69%) of the managers said that they’re often uncomfortable communicating with employees. Over a third (37%) of the managers said that they’re uncomfortable



having to give direct feedback about their employees' performance if they think the employee might respond negatively to the feedback.

The survey results also showed that many managers are uncomfortable with becoming vulnerable, recognizing achievements, delivering the “company line,” giving clear directions, crediting others with having good ideas, speaking face to face, and having difficult feedback conversations in general.

When Managers Are Uncomfortable Giving Feedback



SOURCE INTERACT SURVEY OF 616 MANAGERS CONDUCTED BY HARRIS POLL

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Here's the paradox: People *thrive* on feedback. In my communications consultancy work I have watched droves of top executives, emerging leaders, supervisors, and frontline managers become enlivened — even honored — by feedback, whether it was positive or negative.

Imagine training for a marathon without a watch, never knowing how fast you're running other than the possible exception of the occasional "Good job!" from your coach. You'd have no way of knowing whether you're prepared to meet your goal.

The dark side of sugarcoating and avoiding honest feedback is dysfunction and disconnection, which leads to an unproductive team. That's why it's so important to give feedback early and often. The next time you need to have a difficult feedback conversation with an employee, consider these guidelines:

- **Be direct but kind.** Check your motives before diving into the discussion. If your goal is to shame someone or to feel superior in some way, you're way off track. However, if you see an opportunity for growth, be direct. Don't beat around the bush. Include specific examples of desired behaviors to help illustrate what you mean.
- **Listen.** Listening provides a space in which both people feel respected. Ideally, a feedback conversation is meant to spark learning on both sides — you must understand the situation together to make positive change. Consider this recent [HBR.org article](#) by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, which shared the results of a global study in which respondents were asked to rate their managers on the extent to which they "carefully listened to the other person's point of view before giving them feedback." Respondents who rated their managers as highly effective at listening felt more positively about the manager's ability to provide feedback. The respondents who strongly disagreed with this statement rated their manager significantly lower on providing honest and straightforward feedback on a regular basis.
- **Don't make it personal.** Imagined slights and malice are toxic. It's easy to take things personally in a feedback conversation, but if you acknowledge the emotions being felt, you will offer the recipient a relief valve for the stress.
- **Be present.** Show up fully for the discussion, and don't rush off once it's over. Be brave enough to allow moments of silence to come into the conversation. Follow up later so that afterthoughts don't create imagined distance.
- **Inspire greatness.** Be sure to communicate your aspirations for the person you're giving feedback to.

Respectful, direct feedback costs absolutely nothing but can make all the difference in individual and team productivity. In its absence, we become completely ineffective. Team communication breaks down. Leaders become irrelevant. But when we get it right, feedback can create better collaboration, a culture of connection, and sustainable change.

Lou Solomon is CEO of [Interact](#), a communications consultancy that helps Fortune 500 CEOs, business leaders, managers, entrepreneurs and their teams to develop authenticity, make connections, earn trust and build influence. She's the author of "[Say Something Real](#)", and an adjunct faculty member at the McColl School of Business at Queens University of Charlotte. Connect with her on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).
