

# How to Give Feedback to People Who Cry, Yell, or Get Defensive

By Amy Jen Su

**E**ditor's Note: SHRM has partnered with the Harvard Business Review to bring you relevant articles on key HR topics and strategies. In this article, the author outlines how HR and management can provide feedback to employees who might have a difficult or negative emotional reaction to performance reviews.

There's no denying that performance review season can be a headache for managers. The process of writing reviews and delivering feedback takes a lot of time (especially if you do it thoughtfully) and can be particularly anxiety provoking if you have someone on your team who tends to have a difficult or negative emotional reaction to feedback. So how do you get ready to give feedback to someone who might cry, yell, or get defensive?

## Harvard Business Review

## Advice for All Tough Feedback Sessions

**Remember the "why."** Focus on all the good reasons you're giving the feedback. Remind yourself and your employee by saying things like, "I need to share this with you because I want you to be successful here" or "I want to see you keep growing."

Kim Castelda, a senior vice president at the software company Bullhorn, oversees talent and human resources for 600 employees worldwide. She leads a training program on delivering difficult messages, certifying those who have exemplified a high level of skill in handling the toughest situations. Additionally, twice a year she surveys employees to ask whether they're receiving positive and constructive feedback from their managers. Says Castelda, "I've rarely met someone who didn't want to be successful, and giving feedback is an essential part of that. We want our people to be the best at this, so we hold them accountable."

**Find your center and prepare.** Start by increasing your own self-awareness: How do you react when another person has an emotional reaction? Do you sugarcoat the feedback — trying to avoid a conflict — or get frustrated and fight back? Says Castelda, "It's important to think about how we show up for these conversations. Leaders should walk in centered, prepared, and organized." Don't wing it. You'll feel better prepared if you do your homework in advance and ground your assessments in observations, data, and concrete examples. Invest the time to be as thoughtful as possible.

**Handle reactions in the moment.** Sound preparation won't stop the other person from reacting negatively, but it can help you to respond calmly and effectively when the emotions arise.

**Move the conversation to a productive place.** The goal is to diffuse the emotional reaction so that you can productively give the feedback and, together, come up with ideas and actions to ensure the person's success. This may mean having a second meeting, requesting that you regroup after the person has had time to calm down and collect themselves. Addressing the emotional reaction shouldn't shortchange the other parts of an effective feedback conversation, including: sharing the why, naming the issue clearly, offering examples, listening and hearing the other person out, and coming to a shared agreement on next steps and actions.

## When Talking to Someone Who Has the Tendency to Cry

It's easy to get flustered or frustrated in the face of tears or when the person says things like, "I never do anything right." In these situations, Castelda advises, "Let the person know you that are not being mean, that you are trying to help them be successful, and still put the issue on the table. The person needs to hear the message as kindly and as empathetically as possible, but the message is the message.

Remember, a hard message doesn't have to come with a hard voice or tone. Deliver it thoughtfully and considerately." Other tips include:

- Deliver the feedback at the end of the day so the person can go home afterward
- Have a box of tissues on hand. This action acknowledges the emotion and gives the other person a chance to pause and collect themselves.
- Know that you may have to meet again once the person has calmed down
- Say something like: "I can see you are upset. I understand this is difficult for you. I know you want to be successful, and I want you to be, too. I need you to think about this. Let's set up another meeting tomorrow morning after you've had time to digest."

If tears come from an employee who doesn't normally cry or express emotions in this way, it may be a signal that something else is wrong (<https://hbr.org/2013/06/what-to-do-when-an-employee-cries-at-work>).

### When Talking to Someone Who Yells

When faced with someone who yells or gets angry, it's common to either feel intimidated such that you back down or feel riled up such that you lash back. In his book *Getting Past No*, William Ury says, "When the other side attacks you, your instinctive reaction [may be] to attack right back, to 'fight fire with fire' and 'give them a taste of their own medicine'....More often, however, this strategy lands you in a futile and costly confrontation. You provide them with justification for their unreasonable behavior. They think: 'Ah, I knew you were out to get me. This proves it.'"

Aim to stay calm while standing your ground. Castelda advises, "Be willing to shut down a meeting that is not productive or professional." Say things — in a neutral, composed voice — like:

- "I need to have a conversation with you. I need you to lower your voice."
- "I need you to take a deep breath or we will have to reschedule this. This is not constructive."

Even if the employee claims that yelling shows passion, let them know you appreciate the strength of their convictions but you can do without the yelling. Reiterate your good intentions and let them know you want to hear what they have to say after they've taken a moment or a night to calm down.

### When Talking to Someone Who Gets Defensive

You might get backed up on your heels with someone who has a reason or explanation for everything. As Castelda describes, "The defensive person is like Teflon — it's never his responsibility and he attempts to shift the ownership of blame on someone else."

The employee might say things like, "You've misunderstood. They've got it all wrong. You clearly don't understand" — a tactic to avoid having a constructive dialogue. In this case, Castelda advises, call the person out on not listening and encourage him to do so, or say something like:

- "I see this as your responsibility — let's talk about why you don't see it this way."
- "When you blame someone else, you become the victim, which isn't helpful to you."

### When to Address the Bigger Issue

If the employee's behavior is a recurring pattern, you should address the person's reactive tendency head-on. You might say something like, "I notice every time we sit down to discuss feedback, you get [upset, angry, defensive]. I have your best interests at heart. What can I do to help you receive feedback with more openness? And here's what I need in these interactions." Break the vicious cycle of avoiding difficult feedback conversations. Says Castelda, "Be careful not to stew on things or bottle things up. Give constructive feedback as things come up. It ends up being smaller."

Emotional reactions can put us on opposite sides of the table with the other person. By focusing on good intentions, preparing with integrity, and calmly and effectively responding in the moment, we can move to the same side of the table and help the other person grow.

*Amy Jen Su (<https://hbr.org/search?term=amy+jen+su>) is a co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a boutique executive coaching and leadership development firm. She is co-author, with Muriel Maignan Wilkins, of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence* (<https://hbr.org/own-the-room-discover-your-signature-voice-to-master-your-leadership-presence/an/10931E-KND-ENG>).*

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