

# DELIVERING FEEDBACK THAT STICKS

(ESPECIALLY IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS WHEN THE NORMAL VISUAL CUES AREN'T THERE)

Giving feedback has always been challenging. But in virtual settings, it's become even harder.

When we are face-to-face, we rely on dozens of non-verbal cues to help us read the room: a slight nod, a softening in someone's posture, eye contact that signals understanding. These cues help us pace the conversation, know when to pause, and gauge whether our message is landing the way we intended.

In virtual meetings, most of those cues are degraded or absent entirely. We can't make true eye contact through a screen. We're dealing with increased cognitive load because our brains process each participant as a separate group rather than treating the room as one unified space. The recipient might be trying to read our intent while simultaneously managing their own emotional response and processing the content of what we are saying.

Add in the role our internal narratives play (the stories we tell ourselves about giving feedback in the first place), plus the research finding that ambiguous cues in virtual settings get interpreted more negatively than the same ambiguity in person, and it's no wonder feedback conversations often go sideways.

But here's the thing: feedback is too important to avoid just because it's harder virtually. Leaders who can give feedback effectively – even through a screen – create teams where people grow, performance improves, and trust deepens.

So how do we do it?

Below are seven techniques to help you deliver feedback that actually sticks.

## 1. Prepare Thoroughly – Walk Yourself Down Your Ladder

In my experience, many of us consider that we are better at providing feedback than we really are. Another way to think about this: how many leaders have delivered feedback to you in a way that you could actually hear it and act on it?



- Before you have the feedback conversation, you need to prepare your own thinking. This means walking yourself down what's called the **Ladder of Inference** – the mental process we all go through:
  1. I observe data
  2. I interpret it (through the lens of my own lived experience)
  3. I create a story and label the behaviour
  4. I hold that story as 'truth'
  5. I share it with the other person
- The problem? By the time we're at step 5, we've forgotten steps 1-4 even happened. We think we're sharing objective truth when we're actually sharing our interpretation.

# DELIVERING FEEDBACK THAT STICKS CONT'D

*Before the conversation, ask yourself:*

- What data do I actually have?
- What have I ignored or not noticed?
- What assumptions and conclusions have I made?
- How might this person interpret what I'm about to say?

*Also consider:*

- What's the core message? (Keep it to one clear point)
- What examples will make it concrete?
- What might trigger a defensive reaction in this particular person?
- How can I frame this so that it feels supportive, not threatening?
- What time of day will they be most receptive?
- Will they need time to process before we discuss next steps? (You might need two conversations)

*In a virtual setting, add:*

- What explicit statements do I need to make about my intent that would normally be conveyed through body language?

Your preparation isn't about scripting every word. It's about being intentional, so you don't fall back on your own discomfort and either rush through the delivery or over-complicate it.

## 2. Make Your Intent Super Clear

In person, your supportive intent shows through your facial expressions, your open posture, your tone and the emotional contagion effect. Online, those signals are muted. To compensate, you have to name your intent explicitly.



- Start the conversation with something like:
  - "I would like to share some feedback with you that comes from a genuinely supportive place. My aim is to help you be even more effective than you already are."
  - "I care about your development, which is why I want to talk about something I've noticed."
  - "I want to share some observations that might help you be even more successful."
- This might feel awkward or unnecessary. Do it anyway.
- In virtual settings, people fill gaps with their own narratives – and those narratives are often more negative than reality. Stating your intent explicitly short-circuits that process.

# DELIVERING FEEDBACK THAT STICKS CONT'D

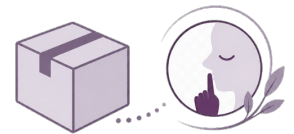


## 3. Use SBI: Situation–Behaviour–Impact

- Once you've stated your intent, deliver the feedback using this structure:
  - SITUATION: Share the context *"I've noticed in our weekly team meetings..."*
  - BEHAVIOUR: Share the raw data, not your interpretation *"...that you speak a lot and often, sometimes talking over other people including me."*
  - IMPACT: Share the effect on yourself and others *"It makes me feel like you don't value what people have to say and that yours is the only good idea."* Many people don't realise the impact (usually unintended) that their behaviour is having on others.
- Notice what this does:
  - It grounds the feedback in specific observable behaviour (not labels of behaviour e.g. "you're dominating" or "you're aggressive").
  - It separates what happened from your interpretation.
  - It shares the impact without making it a character judgment.
- This is critical in virtual settings where the recipient can't see your body language to know you're being supportive. The structure itself conveys care and thoughtfulness.

## 4. Deliver It, Then Stay Silent

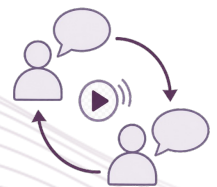
This is often the hardest part. You've said the thing. Now there's a pause. It feels excruciating. You want to fill the silence, soften it, explain it, walk it back.



- Don't.
- The recipient needs a moment to process. What you just said might have triggered their own internal narratives:
  - "The feedback is wrong"
  - "I can't hear this feedback from you"
  - "This is not how I see myself"
- They need space to move through that initial reaction and actually hear what you said.
- In a virtual setting, this silence feels even more awkward because you can't read micro-expressions. You might see them look away from the camera and panic, thinking they're upset, when really, they are just thinking.
- Count to ten. Let them be the first to speak.

## 5. Ask Them to Play Back What They Heard (If you do only one thing – do this!)

Here's the thing about feedback: the message you wanted to send is frequently not the message the receiver hears.



- You say: "I'd like you to delegate more so your team develops and you can focus on strategic work."
- They hear: "You're doing too much. You can't handle your workload. You're failing."

# DELIVERING FEEDBACK THAT STICKS CONT'D

- This is why asking them to play back what they heard is the single most important technique on this list. After you've delivered the feedback and given them space to process, ask:
  - "Play back what you heard me say?"
  - "What's your understanding of the concern I'm raising?"
  - "How are you interpreting this?"
- Listen carefully. If there's a mismatch between what you intended and what they heard, you can clarify in the moment by saying "That's not quite what I meant. Let me try again. What I wanted to convey was..."
- This prevents them from leaving the conversation with the wrong message and spending the next week ruminating on what you have said.

## 6. Watch for SARA – And Don't Rush Past Resistance

- As you are having the conversation, the recipient is moving through predictable stages:
  - SHOCK: "What?? I don't understand this." "It's just a survey." "The data isn't right."
  - ANGER: "They're just venting their frustrations." "Who said this?" "The survey doesn't fit my situation."
  - RESISTANCE: "Nobody's perfect, we all have faults." "That's just the way I am – take it or leave it." "I get it, but I don't like it."
  - ACCEPTANCE: "How can I best use this feedback?" "How can I improve?" "Who can help me make this change?"
- Don't be fooled by "yeah, okay" or "fine". These are typically resistance statements, not acceptance.
- Check in explicitly on how it's landing:
  - "How is this sitting with you?"
  - "What are you thinking about what I've said?"
  - "How does this feedback feel?"
- In person, you'd see their reaction in real time. Online, you need to ask.
- Checking in serves two purposes:
  - It gives them permission to share if they're struggling with what they have heard.
  - It gives you information about whether they're ready to move to solutions or need more time to process.
- If they say, "I'm really surprised by this" or "I'm not sure I agree", that's valuable data. Don't rush past it to get to "so here's what you should do differently".



## 7. Don't Rush to Next Steps – They Might Need Time

Here's where most feedback conversations fall apart: we deliver the feedback, there's a brief acknowledgment, and then we immediately pivot to "so let's talk about how you can address it".



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- But the recipient might not be ready for that conversation yet. They might need time to:
  - Sit with the feedback
  - Decide whether they agree with it.
  - Process their emotional response
  - Think through what changes actually make sense
- In virtual settings, this is even more important because the cognitive load is already high. Asking them to problem-solve in the moment when they're still processing might be too much.
- Instead, try:
  - "I don't need you to have all the answers right now. Take some time to think about this, and let's talk next week about how you want to approach it."
  - "Would it be helpful to chat again in a few days after you've had time to reflect?"
  - "What would be most useful for you right now? Do you want to talk through next steps, or would you rather process this first?"
- Sometimes feedback sticks better when you give it room to breathe.
- This might mean scheduling two conversations: one to deliver the feedback, and a second one to discuss actions. That's okay. Better to have two productive conversations than one that leaves the person overwhelmed and unable to act.
- Only once you're satisfied that the person has reached acceptance, you can move into coaching and developing actionable suggestions together.

## What Our Body and Eyes Do Automatically in Person, Our Words Have to Do Online

- Virtual settings create structural barriers to delivering feedback well. The normal cues that help us pace conversations, read emotional responses, and convey supportive intent are degraded or missing entirely.
- But feedback is too important to avoid. Leaders who master these techniques – who learn to externalise what would normally be conveyed non-verbally – create teams where people grow even in distributed work environments.
- The intent hasn't changed. The care hasn't changed. The desire to help people develop hasn't changed.
- What's changed is the delivery channel. And that means we have to be more deliberate, more explicit, and more patient than we'd need to be face-to-face.
- Start with these seven techniques. Notice what works with your team. Refine your approach.
- The leaders who figure this out aren't just better at giving feedback virtually – they're building stronger, more trusting relationships despite the distance.



## About the Author

Liane Kemp is an accredited leadership development consultant and coach, and founder of Kemp Street Partners. With extensive experience working with senior executives and C-suite leaders, she specialises in helping leaders build the confidence they need to be effective in challenging situations. Learn more at [www.kempstreetpartners.com.au](http://www.kempstreetpartners.com.au) or by email on [LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au](mailto:LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au)