

10 Tips for Constructive Feedback from the Rambam

by Daniel Roth



Imagine you are managing a project and a team member makes a blunder at a crucial moment. Unable to contain your frustration and rage, you blow up at him in front of everyone, yelling, "I can't believe you did that! What were you thinking?! You are always making these kinds of mistakes!"

If this scenario seems even slightly familiar to you (whether as a project manager, team member, parent, child, teacher, student, counselor or camper) it may be time to get some free consultation from Rabbi Dr. Moshe ben Maimon (the Rambam) on how to better offer constructive feedback, or as it is known in rabbinic literature, *tokhahah*.

The Rambam (Hilchot Deot 6:6) writes:

"When a man commits a transgression against a fellow person, he should not hate the offender and keep silent...rather, there is a mitzvah incumbent upon him to inform him and say to him, 'Why did you do such and such to me?' and, 'For what reason did you commit a transgression against me in regard to the specified matter?'"

From here we learn a few important tips for offering constructive feedback:

1. Don't keep your frustration in and not say anything; too often it will only foster more hatred and destructive behavior.
2. Honestly ask to understand *their* perspective as to why they may have done or not done what is bothering you.
3. Be as specific as possible about what is bothering you, avoiding generalizations.

The Rambam then continues (Hilchot Deot 6:7):

"He who reproves his friend...is required to reprove him [in private] between the other person and himself, to speak gently and in a soft manner, and to make known to him that you are speaking to him only for his benefit..."

Here the Rambam adds more advice:

4. Speak to the person in private, not in front of peers or others.
5. Speak gently and in a soft manner. This is best achieved when you speak from your point of view, not presenting the events as hard evidence against them, thereby leaving room for them to hear you and share their perspective.
6. Try to explain that you are bringing the issue up in order to help them (and you) learn and grow from the experience and not for the sake of hurting them.

Contemporary conflict resolution specialists add their own tips, such as:

7. Prepare your comments in advance so you can be clear about what you want to say and how you want to say it.
8. Limit your focus to no more than two issues. Beyond that, it may create defensiveness and the cessation of the learning process.
9. Share with them positive points of their performance, thereby stressing that the feedback you are offering is within a larger context.
10. Discuss specific suggestions for how the situation can be best improved or avoided in the future.

After this consultation with the Rambam, think about how the conversation could be different. When done correctly, providing constructive feedback can be straightforward and helpful rather than difficult and hurtful. It should lead to growth and increase real peace between you, as Resh Lakish said, "*Tokhahah brings to peace...any peace without tokhahah is not peace*" (Genesis Rabbah 54:3).

Daniel Roth is the Director of the Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution. For more information and further reading see <http://pcjcr.pardes.org>. Special thanks to Rabbi Dr. Chaim Kaminsky, PCJCR Senior Research Scholar for his research on this topic.