



Episode 68: How to Give Feedback Upwards

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. I am especially excited for today's episode, because this topic was requested by a listener. And to all you listeners, if you have a topic that you'd like me to cover, please email me and share your suggestion.

The topic I was asked about is how to share challenging information upwards with senior leadership. Challenging information might mean data that you think will be disappointing for people to receive or information you think needs to be shared and will be hard to hear. It can also include feedback about an employee that is negatively impacting the company.

While these kinds of conversations might be easier with a direct report or peer, they can feel tricky when you're having them with your boss or senior leadership. After all, you want to make a good impression and show up as positive. And you want to be seen as a team player.

And you likely feel compelled to share difficult news because it's important for the company's goals, the culture, or your own integrity.

This can be a tricky place to be. You want to have the conversation for the sake of something bigger than you, and you'll want to navigate it with intention and preparation. How do you prepare so that you can deliver the news in a way you feel good about?

Today's framework is one that can help. It's a framework that helps you think through how to prepare for a meeting given the greater context of the stakeholders and the organization.

When you prepare in a more complete and thorough way, you can show up more clearly and confidently – and give the impression that you'd like.

Today's framework is called the "before, during, and after" framework. As the name implies, it's an opportunity to recognize and capitalize on what's in your control before, during, and after a conversation.

Conversations involving challenging information are often more than one single meeting. Because of that, these conversations require pre-thinking – and thinking through a number of factors.

Before an important conversation, it helps to think through who will be in the room, how they like to receive information, and what data they're most interested in. The information you share will be considered in a larger context, and so you'll want to understand and be able to speak to the organizational goals, values, and culture.

In addition to having clarity about these pieces, you'll also want to be aware of how you show up to the conversation, meaning the body language and energy you bring.

Lastly, as you prepare for the conversation, you'll also want to think about the follow-up. There's usually a next step, and having clarity about what you might suggest or do helps you be seen as someone who can think about complexity and longer-term considerations.

All of these pieces are included in the “before, during, and after” framework. As you think through the 3 parts of the framework, you'll get clear on what's in your control, what your role is in the situation, your goal for the conversation, and how you want to show up.

Clarity is key. The clearer we are in our mind, the clearer and more confidently we can communicate.

The way we get clear about things is to coach ourselves – that means, to ask ourselves open-ended questions and then to take time to answer them.

Using the “before, during, and after” framework is easy. You simply consider what you might want to do or say before the conversation, during the conversation, and then after the conversation.

Let's take these one at a time.

As you think about a conversation with senior leadership in which you want to share challenging information, you first think about the “before” piece. This is about preparing your thoughts and thinking from different perspectives.

You can coach yourself by asking the following question:

What's my goal for this specific meeting?

Explicitly stating the meeting goal can help focus the conversation.

When you're bringing challenging information, your goal will probably be something that's important to the organization. Your goal might be to share information that's creating a negative impact on the culture. Or your goal might be to share data that can help with key decision making. Think about how to explain the goal of the conversation in a way that benefits the organization.

Another “before” piece to think about is your talking points. What is the specific information you want to share? How do you want to share it? What visuals would be helpful? What might you send ahead of time?

Be sure to think about how to share the information in a way that's less judgmental and more objective.

The “before” bucket also is an opportunity to think about the people in the room and what you know about their communication styles. How do they like to receive and process information? What do they care about?

One other big “before” piece to think about is your presence and body language. What's the energy you want to bring? Confident? Deferential? How do you want to show up?

Your “before” piece can also be the things that you do before the conversation. Who else might have data that's helpful? Who could you practice your talking points with?

The “before” pieces are important to prepare and choose what you bring to the conversation and how you want to present yourself.

The next piece of the framework is the “during” piece. For this piece, you want to think ahead of time about things you can do during the conversation. This piece is about having a plan for the things you can say or do in the middle of the conversation.

Two questions to ask yourself for self-coaching are:

What’s in my control during the meeting? What considerations might I think through?

For example, if you know that you have a tendency to talk quickly, you could bring water and take a sip to give yourself a moment of pause. If you’re worried or feeling nervous, you can make a plan to exhale, breathe, or put your attention to your feet the ground.

You might decide where you want to sit and what you want to bring with you.

Think about all of the things that are in your control during the meeting. There’s always more in our control than we think, and choosing what’s in our control is empowering.

The last piece of the framework is the “after” piece. There will likely be next steps, and you get to think about what those might be. The coaching questions to ask yourself are:

What’s in my control after the meeting? Who do I want to follow up with? What follow up email or text might I send?

If you anticipate having emotions with this meeting, your “after” piece might also include having a plan to return to center. How will you do that?

Your “after” piece is thinking about what your brain and body might need for closure or follow up, and then making a plan for those.

Difficult conversations are called those because they can take overtake our thinking and cause stress in our bodies – this is especially true with conversations that involve sharing challenging information upwards with senior leaders.

Taking time to coach yourself, think through, and implement the “before, during, and after” pieces can help you have less stress and more clarity. Having clarity can reassure you that you’re complaining less and being more intentional. Having clarity will also feed your confidence, which makes it more likely that you’ll communicate concisely, purposefully, and with an eye toward problem solving. And that’s being a valuable team member.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help preparing for an important conversation, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I’m here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you’re confident you’re moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!