You’ve Been Doing a Fantastic Job. Just One Thing ...

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MOST of us think we know how to give feedback. Positive comments are better — and more useful — than negative ones. And if you do have to point out something wrong, start with a compliment, move on to the problem, then end on a high note.

It turns out that it’s not that simple. Those who have studied the issue have found that negative feedback isn’t always bad and positive feedback isn’t always good. Too often, they say, we forget the purpose of feedback — it’s not to make people feel better, it’s to help them do better.

A recent research paper, “[Tell Me What I did Wrong: Experts Seek and Respond to Negative Feedback](http://www.mendeley.com/catalog/tell-me-i-wrong-experts-seek-respond-negative-feedback/),” in The Journal of Consumer Research, says that when people are experts on a subject, or consider themselves experts, they’re more eager to hear negative feedback, while those novices are more likely to seek positive responses.

One experiment surveyed students in beginning-level French classes and advanced-level French literature classes. Participants completed a questionnaire about choosing an instructor. They were asked if they would prefer an instructor who emphasized what students were doing well in class and talked about their strengths, such as when they pronounced new words well, or an instructor who focused mostly on what mistakes they made and how to fix those mistakes.

Those who had just started learning the language wanted the positive feedback, while those who had been taking the French classes longer were more interested in hearing about what they did wrong and how to correct it.

Why is that? One reason is that as people gain expertise, feedback serves a different purpose. When people are just beginning a venture, they may not have much confidence, and they need encouragement. But experts’ commitment “is more secure than novices and their focus is on their progress,” the paper’s authors said. Even labeling feedback as either negative or positive isn’t helpful, said Tim Harford, author of “Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure.” He noted that his karate teacher told him specific things to do, like bending his toes backward or rotating his hips. “It’s not useful to say, ‘That’s really good or that’s really bad,’ ” Mr. Harford said. “We need to separate the emotional side from the technical points.”

That, of course, is much easier said than done, which is why most of us have such trouble giving or getting critiques.

We don’t want to be the bad guy. But Laura Ching, now chief design officer for Shutterfly Inc., found that she wasn’t helping anyone when she tried to be, as she said, a people pleaser.

Early in her career, when she worked at Walmart, she had to tell an employee that she wasn’t doing a good job. But instead of spending 90 percent of the time telling her what she needed to do better and 10 percent encouraging her, “I probably did 50-50,” Ms. Ching said. “And she heard only the positive. So when the annual review time came, and she got, ‘does not meet expectations,’ there was such a disconnect.”

Mr. Harford knows the problem well. He calls it the “praise sandwich,” where we stuff the bad stuff between two slices of compliments. But people often hear only the praise.

“We say, ‘That was a great piece of work, there was just a small problem,’ ” Mr. Harford said. “What we tend to hear is, ‘That was a great piece of work.’ ”

The better way, Ms. Ching said, is to be straightforward.

Research bears that out. In a class she teaches, Ayelet Fishbach, a professor of behavioral science and marketing at the University of Chicago and co-author of the paper “Tell Me What I Did Wrong,” conducts a simulation where half the class gives one-on-one feedback to the other half. Although the feedback givers were supposed to indicate that performance was unsatisfactory, that improvement was needed and to offer ways to do better, in surveys filled out later, the half getting the feedback “thinks they’re doing great,” she said.

While many of us tend to hear what we want to hear, Professor Fishbach says she thinks the problem lies more with those providing the feedback. “The negative feedback is often buried and not very specific,” she said.

Professor Fishbach also said people giving feedback often didn’t give enough information, offered it too late or told subordinates what would happen if they did something wrong rather than what they were actually doing wrong. Employees need to know in detail what they should do to get promoted, for instance. If you tell them simply that they’re not going to get promoted, she said, “That’s not feedback — it’s already an outcome.”

Some companies have developed their own terminology for feedback. Peter Sims, author of “Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge From Small Discoveries,” said the film company Pixar used an idea it called “plussing.” The point, he said, is to “build and improve on ideas without using judgmental language.”

Here’s an example he offers in his book. An animator working on “Toy Story 3” shares her rough sketches and ideas with the director. “Instead of criticizing the sketch or saying ‘no,’ the director will build on the starting point by saying something like, ‘I like Woody’s eyes, and what if his eyes rolled left?”

Using words like “and” or “what if,” rather than “but” is a way to offer suggestions and allow creative juices to flow without fear, Mr. Sims said.

Brain scans of people show that judgmental language — or even being told you have to do things in a certain way — lead to self-censoring, Mr. Sims told me. Such scans show that when a musician is playing scales, for example, “the part of the brain responsible for judging lights up,” he said. “That doesn’t happen when playing jazz improvisation.”

Plussing is particularly helpful in the early stages, when there are lots of ways a character can progress, he said, but as ideas become more developed, it gets tougher.

“Animators at Pixar freely describe how painful it can be to have directors plussing their ideas until the smallest details, say a sliver of hair, seems just perfect,” he writes in his book. “But plussing allows for both pointed critique and positive feedback simultaneously, so that even such persistent criticism is not deflating.”

That’s the trick then: making negative feedback precise and timely enough so that it’s helpful but neutral enough so that it’s not perceived as harshly critical. That’s particularly difficult in a culture like ours, where anything short of effusive praise can be viewed as an affront.

But, again, if we look at feedback as an opportunity to make someone work better rather than feel better, we’re more likely to do it successfully. As Professor Fishbach said, “We’re probably unaware that people would like to know how to improve, and they deserve to know it. It’s their right.”

