

Guidance Handling Emotional Reactions

No matter how well you try to deliver feedback, you may still get certain reactions. After all, feedback can be shocking, and people respond differently. Handling the reaction is much like *follow through* in tennis. Follow through is just as important as the shot itself to successfully score. Equally, you must handle the reaction carefully so as not to undo all your efforts so far while delivering the feedback.

SILENCE

Reaction:

Silence can be one of the most challenging reactions to interpret, as it can represent any of the RAWA reactions or a combination of them. The person may be processing the information, feeling overwhelmed, preparing a response, or simply not know how to react. Silence can indicate deep reflection, emotional shutdown, or even a form of passive resistance. It's important not to jump to conclusions about what the silence means and to handle it with care.

Examples:

- [No verbal response]
- [Avoiding eye contact]
- [Staring blankly]
- [Nodding or shaking head without speaking]

Your Response:

When faced with silence, resist the urge to immediately fill the void with more talking. Allow for the silence and use it as an opportunity to observe non-verbal cues. Be patient and give the person time to process the feedback. If the silence persists, gently probe to understand what they're thinking or feeling. Remember that silence can be a productive part of the feedback process, allowing for reflection and thoughtful response.

- Allow for a moment of silence; don't rush to fill it
- Observe non-verbal cues to gauge their reaction
- Gently ask what they're thinking or feeling
- Be prepared to address any of the RAWA reactions once they respond
- If silence persists, suggest taking a break and resuming the conversation later
- Offer to rephrase or clarify the feedback in case it wasn't clear
- Acknowledge that silence is a valid response and can be a sign of deep reflection
- Propose alternative ways of continuing the conversation (e.g., in writing, with a mediator)
- Use open-ended questions to encourage verbal response when appropriate
- Reassure them that it's okay to take time to process the feedback

Remember, silence doesn't necessarily indicate a negative reaction. It can be a sign of careful consideration or an opportunity for both parties to reflect. Your ability to handle silence with patience and understanding can significantly impact the overall effectiveness of the feedback conversation.

REJECTION

Reaction:

When faced with feedback, the person may struggle to accept the information, refusing to believe or acknowledge it. They might question the validity of the feedback, dismiss its importance, or deny the situation entirely. This reaction often stems from a fear of failure or a strong desire to maintain their self-image. The person may attempt to rationalise or find excuses to invalidate the feedback, making it challenging to move forward

Examples:

"This can't be happening to me."

"This is the end of me."

"You cannot be serious."

"This isn't real. It can't be."

Your Response:

You can use several techniques to counteract the rejection.

- Empathise with the person and show that you care.
- Explain the facts and provide more details so they have a better picture.
- Provide more details on any decision you have made to clarify and justify it.
- Restate the feedback clearly and provide specific examples
- Ask open-ended questions to understand their perspective
- Give them time to process the information
- Acknowledge the difficulty of accepting the feedback
- Revisit the context for the feedback to make it less personal
- Offer support in developing an action plan to address the feedback

ANGER

Reaction:

Upon hearing the feedback, the person may take it personally becomes emotional, imagine extreme consequences, misjudge your intentions, or even see you as the cause of the feedback. This may lead them to be upset with the feedback, or with you, and they may initiate a verbal attack.

Examples:

"You're completely wrong about this!"

"If I go down, I will take you with me."

"This is so unfair!"

"You clearly have it in for me."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Your Response:

Understand that the other person is potentially emotional, upset and angry. They may say things they don't mean. Stay calm and in control. Show that you are listening and care. Allow time for them to slowly calm down and adopt your style. Sometimes they may just need to vent out the anger and then calm down. By reacting and starting an argument, you will only escalate the situation. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Don't be tempted to quickly answer back.

- Remain composed and avoid becoming defensive
- Listen actively and acknowledge their feelings without judgment
- Use a calm tone and neutral body language
- Redirect the conversation to focus on solutions
- If needed, suggest taking a short break to cool down
- Allow them to express their anger without interruption
- Use reflective listening to show you understand their perspective
- Set boundaries if the anger becomes inappropriate or abusive
- Once the anger subsides, refocus on the core issues and potential solutions

WITHDRAWAL

Reaction:

Upon receiving feedback, the person may retreat emotionally or physically from the conversation. They might become quiet, avoid eye contact, or express a desire to end the discussion. This reaction often comes from feeling overwhelmed, embarrassed, or unsure how to respond. The person may need time to process the information internally, or they might be trying to protect themselves from further perceived criticism. In extreme cases, withdrawal can lead to disengagement from their role or responsibilities.

Examples:

"I need some time to process this."

"Maybe I'm just not cut out for this job."

"I don't want to discuss this anymore."

"No one ever liked me!"

"I knew I would fail at this."

Your Response:

Understand that the person may be feeling overwhelmed, embarrassed, or unsure how to respond. Respect their need for space, but don't end the conversation prematurely. Use a gentle tone and ask open-ended questions to encourage engagement. Reassure them of your support and willingness to help. If they remain withdrawn, suggest a follow-up meeting to discuss further after they've had time to reflect. Be patient and avoid pushing too hard, as this may cause them to withdraw further.

- Give them space, but don't end the conversation prematurely
- Ask gentle, open-ended questions to encourage engagement
- Reassure them of your support and willingness to help
- Suggest a follow-up meeting to discuss further after they've had time to reflect
- Acknowledge their need for time to process the information
- Offer to break down the feedback into smaller, more manageable parts

- Provide written feedback to allow for private reflection
- Explore any underlying fears or concerns that may be causing the withdrawal

ACCEPTANCE

Reaction:

When demonstrating acceptance, the person receives the feedback with an open mind and a willingness to learn. They may ask clarifying questions, express gratitude for the input, or immediately start thinking about how to improve. This reaction shows emotional maturity and a growth mindset. The person sees the feedback as an opportunity for development rather than a personal attack. Even if they don't fully agree with all aspects of the feedback, they're able to engage in a constructive dialogue and focus on next steps.

Examples:

- "I appreciate your feedback."
- "I understand where you're coming from."
- "How can I improve going forward?"
- "I see your point, but I disagree."
- "I'm sorry, I'll do better next time."
- "Can you give me another chance?"

Your Response:

Appreciate and reinforce what is positive in their reaction to the feedback. This demonstrates emotional maturity and a growth mindset. Engage them in a discussion about next steps and create an action plan together. Offer continued support and resources to help them implement changes. Express your appreciation for their openness to feedback and willingness to improve. Use this opportunity to deepen your working relationship and build trust.

- Reinforce their positive reaction
- Discuss next steps and create an action plan together
- Offer continued support and resources
- Express appreciation for their openness to feedback
- Explore their understanding of the feedback to ensure alignment
- Discuss specific behaviours or actions they can take to improve
- Set up regular check-ins to monitor progress and provide ongoing support
- Encourage them to seek feedback more frequently in the future