

Giving Feedback, Effectively

Here's what happens in a law firm. You (the partner) give work to the associate and if it isn't great, that associate may never get another chance. You stop giving him or her work. Even worse – you stop making eye contact and then it's over – you know it's over and very soon he or she knows it's over.

Is there a better way? A recent survey of the legal community done by Catalyst Canada Inc. noted that an associate (in a large firm) breaks even at 1.8 years tenure and that every associate that leaves the firm costs, on average, \$318,000. Have I got your attention?

Giving feedback effectively is cited by many partners as one of the most difficult and uncomfortable parts of the mentoring relationship. Getting feedback that is timely and useful is among the most critical components in the development of younger lawyers.



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While some people do it naturally, for others it is more difficult. There is hope. Giving feedback is a skill that can be learned. Giving feedback shows associates that you care about them as individuals; that you care about their development and that you are committed to delivering quality to our clients – you will stand for nothing less, but you will help them (the associates with whom you work) achieve that high standard. As Jay Lorsch and Tom Tierney said in their 2002 best seller, *Aligning the Stars* "...great firms invest so heavily in their stars (because) to put it bluntly, they understand the costs of mediocrity."

In our survey of partners and associates in 63 law firms in 41 countries done in 2004, associates told us that feedback that is informal, oral and timely was the absolute most effective feedback they get – it is what helps them to develop as professionals. The next article in this series is about accepting feedback – indeed devouring it. Here are my best tips for giving feedback.

1. **Be specific:** Clarity is key - what specifically went wrong and what specifically was missing. Provide suggestions for what you would have done differently.
2. **Be constructive:** Provide information that will help the associate learn. Instead of providing the solution, engage in conversation. Questions like "have you thought of this?" or "have you considered that?" are very powerful; they are questions that are engaging and constructive.
3. **Focus on the behaviour rather than on the person:** A person that has weak drafting skills may not be weak at grasping concepts, weak intellectually or weak as a lawyer – no, he might just be weak at drafting. A person who struggles with networking may be shy or awkward in social situations but may have intellectual horsepower that would knock your socks off, if given the opportunity.
4. **Deliver real-time feedback:** Feedback delayed is feedback denied. Associates tell me that comments on an evaluation form that appear six months after the incident, are next to useless. The context is lost and memories are short and all too often these comments are not attributed to specific partners. This leads me to

the next critical aspect of feedback.

5. **Own the feedback:** If you are not happy with something an associate has done for you – own it. “I am disappointed.” “I would have done this differently.” “I have some feedback for you on this document.” “I” is critical. Be careful not to generalize: Catch yourself before using words like “always” or “never”. You are giving feedback about a specific piece of work or a specific behaviour – don’t generalize.
6. **Ask good questions:** There is nothing more engaging than good questions. Asking good questions can get your protégé to come to their own conclusions – there is nothing more powerful.
7. **Have a little respect:** You may be a partner, however, your associate desperately wants to be your colleague. Feedback that is demeaning and insulting hurts any hope of developing a professional relationship. Attacks that focus on the weaknesses of a young professional only make you look bad – not her.
8. **Be supportive:** Begin by stating your confidence in the individual’s capability. You hired this associate because she was bright, interviewed well and had great academic achievements. You hired raw talent. With supportive and encouraging feedback you may just help that young lawyer reach her potential.
9. **Sensitivity and timing:** “I’ve got some feedback for you on the Smith matter. Is this a good time or shall we set aside a few minutes later today?” This is a very powerful statement. It shows a sense of importance and urgency (today), but it also shows sensitivity and respect. Further it gives the individual a bit of time to gain composure.



Associates crave feedback from lawyers they admire. They want to know what you do, how you do it, how they can develop their skills and earn your confidence. The younger generation is, as a demographic, loyal to their skills – not to you. If they can develop their skills their loyalty will grow. If they can’t, they’ll be gone. In many ways, it’s your choice.

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