CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

I. Goals/Outcomes

1. To be used when you need to create feedback about the presentation of ideas to a large group (10–50 people)
2. Use when trust within the group is low

II. Background/Context

Whenever you have groups working together to solve difficult institutional problems (such as low campus morale, poor institutional communication, or breakdown in trust between groups), there will be many opportunities to present ideas and receive feedback. Many of the activities presented in this book rely on actively soliciting feedback from other stakeholders.

Feedback creates the opportunity to enhance ideas and provide a reality check on the practicality of suggestions and ideas. Unfortunately, there is a downside to feedback that must be carefully managed by the change leader. We have witnessed work groups making a presentation to others within the institution and seeing the feedback process become a critical and demoralizing process. What should have been an opportunity to build and strengthen ideas becomes a “turkey shoot” where the critics prevail and ideas are destroyed. Once you have experienced a meeting like this, enthusiasm for future presentations quickly fades.

The challenge for the change leader is to create a constructive and timely feedback process. You want to obtain effective and honest feedback and create both emotional and intellectual safety in the process.

This tool enables all participants to present their ideas and receive appropriate feedback. It also creates the opportunity for less verbal people to participate and encourages shy group members to provide constructive feedback. It neutralizes the power of the critics while getting their ideas in the room.
III. Logistics

- Materials: Large (5" x 7") Post-its™ (allow about 10-12 per participant), flipcharts, and easels
- Space needs: Large, comfortable room where participants can move around easily
- Time frame: This depends on the number of people or groups that are presenting. This process should only take 2–4 minutes per presentation.
- Number of participants: 10 to 50

IV. Implementation

In this activity we are going to assume that participants have been working in small groups on solving an institutional problem and are ready to present their ideas to others in the larger group.

When participants are ready to make their presentations, the facilitator informs everyone before the presentations are made that the feedback process is going to be a little different.

Make sure that all participants have some large (5" x 7") Post-its™, about 10–12 per participant. Inform everyone that they should use the Post-its™ to write down their feedback regarding the presentations. Their written feedback can address any of the following three elements:

A. What participants like about the ideas presented by others. It is always nice to hear what people appreciate about ideas, so encourage this. (e.g., “Your idea of having a weekly breakfast meeting between faculty and administrators is just what we need.”)

B. Resources to share. This could include people’s names, suggested contacts, books, research that would help leverage or enhance the effectiveness of the suggested ideas or plans presented. (e.g., “In your plan to assess faculty governance, you should contact Byrne College which just completed a governance audit on their campus” or “You might want to read the article by Dr. Jim Seitz on “Curriculum Renewal and Faculty Engagement” in the October 2000 issue of Campus Matters.”)

C. Suggestions to improve the ideas presented. (e.g., “You suggest that different groups meet with the president on a regular basis. I believe she should visit different places on campus rather than have everyone come to her office” or “Your communication plan seems very one way. You need to build in more interaction where campus stakeholders have the opportunity to provide feedback and ideas.”)

It is always helpful to provide examples so that the participants clearly understand what kind of feedback you seek.

Let participants know that after each presentation, several minutes will be provided so that they can write down their feedback on Post-its™. After they have written their feedback, have them place the Post-its™ on the appropriate flipchart. Then have the next presentation (this should take no more than 2–4 minutes per presentation). Option: You can wait until all the presentations are done before you place the Post-its™ on the flipcharts.

Continue the process of presentation, time for written feedback, and placing Post-its™ until all the presentations are completed and feedback provided.
The final step is to have each presenting group meet for 10–15 minutes to read the feedback on the Post-its™, react to the feedback, and reach beginning agreement on how to include the suggestions for improvement and resource ideas, where appropriate.

It is helpful to use the same three elements in the same sequence. 1) things you like about the idea, 2) resources to share, 3) suggestions for improvement. The structured sequence ensures that individuals do not go to what is wrong with the ideas right away!

Helpful Hint
In a group with low trust or one that is very new at collaborative practices, this is an excellent way to solicit feedback in a non-threatening way. As stakeholders get used to being more open, you can try a more direct approach where you solicit verbal feedback from participants.