

The Gourmet Chef's Guide to Giving Feedback

The ability to give constructive feedback is a key communications skill. This article uses the metaphor of preparing and serving a gourmet meal to illustrate how this can be done most effectively.

Know Your Diner

Personalize the menu to suit the tastes of the diner. Is she/he a vegetarian, or partial to hearty Italian or spicy Cajun food?

The style of communication that you use with one person is not necessarily appropriate for another. Some people respond well to an informal comment about their performance and others prefer a more formal exchange. Some like to stick to conversations about business; others prefer to feel a personal connection.

Select Fresh Ingredients

While "day old bread" may be acceptable in some circumstances, stale food has little nutritional value:

Feedback is most useful when given as close as possible to the behavior that elicits it. Sometimes it is necessary to pause long enough to compose your thoughts and feelings, but the shorter the delay the less chance the feedback will get distorted and the more relevant the feedback will be.

Don't Starve or Overfeed Diners

Waiting too long between feedings makes the meal a shock to the system, just as overeating makes the meal hard to digest: Frequently people complain that the only time they get feedback is at an annual review when they get too much information to deal with. Establish a relationship in which feedback in both directions is on-going.

Prepare a Healthy, Well-balanced Meal

Keep all toxic substances out of the kitchen and the dining room. Plan a nutritious meal with a variety of textures and colors:

The purpose of feedback is to support and improve the efforts of people, not to dump on people you don't like. Separate out any feeling of yours, which do not directly relate to the person's performance. Think about the range of activities the person has performed and not just the high- or low-lights.

Appetizer

The appetizer sets the tone for the rest of the meal and should be something special to get the diner's attention:

Avoid setting up a "yes, but. . ." situation by giving the opening impression that everything is terrific if it isn't. Try to find an example of work that exemplifies both strengths and weaknesses.

Main Dish

Be sure it is served at the appropriate temperature- not too hot and not too cold. Cut entrée into small digestible pieces:

Be careful not to over/underreact to particular aspects of someone's performance. Maintenance activities are as important as special projects. Identify specific examples of behaviors that illustrate your points.

Dessert

Dessert should complement the meal -- neither too sweet nor filled with empty calories. It should leave the diner with a good taste in his/her mouth:

If it was a tough discussion, acknowledge it. Identify any outstanding issues and next steps.

Provide Napkins and Toothpicks

Just in case the diner needs to remove the embarrassing telltale signs of a meal or would like to enjoy an after-dinner mint, provide an opportunity to freshen up before leaving:

Regardless of how well all of the above goes, each person could probably benefit from a few minutes alone either to think about information that was hard to hear and/or to revel over a job well done.

Overall, two principles must be kept in mind:

The meal is prepared to best suit the needs of the diner, not the chef. You want to encourage diners to come back for more.

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