

Giving and Receiving Feedback on Creative Work

Mark McGuinness, HOW Design Live, June 22nd 2012

1. The challenge facing design leaders

Conversations about the quality and fitness of creative work are full of pitfalls. Creatives, managers and clients may all have very different views on the standard of a given piece of work — and whether it meets the brief.

For creatives, it's a touchy subject because they're so passionate about their work. And clients and managers can be prickly because they're under so much pressure to deliver business results.

As a design leader, you're under pressure from both sides: as a manager you understand the business pressures at work, and the need to find a solution everyone is happy with; and as a designer, you know how tough it can be to have your work shredded by poorly-worded criticism. Which means you are acutely conscious of the need to keep your team motivated in the face of feedback from outside.

So you need to find a way to facilitate genuinely constructive conversations about creative work — within your team, and between your team members and external stakeholders.

We hear a lot about *giving* feedback, but you can't control others' words, so **it's essential that you and your team know how to *receive* feedback in a professional, constructive and resilient spirit.**

What follows are practical tips for giving AND receiving feedback in ways that not only make the work better, but strengthen the working relationships between everyone concerned.

But before we get into the 'how to', it's important to understand *why* creative work presents a special challenge when it comes to feedback.

2. Why is it so hard?

There are two main reasons why giving feedback on creative work is even more challenging than giving feedback on behaviour, or other types of work.

i. Identification

Creative professionals are passionate about their work — often to the point of obsessiveness. They put their heart and soul into their work, and it becomes an extension of their self. **Because they identify with their creations, criticism of their work is felt as personal criticism.**

The words of Gustave Flaubert apply to designers as well as writers:

“A book is essentially organic, part of ourselves. We tear a length of gut from our bellies and serve it up.”

So when someone dismisses a designer’s work with clumsy or extreme language, it *hurts*. She isn’t being precious — this is how she’s wired.

ii. Subjectivity

Business puts pressure on people to make black-and-white judgments — but there are a lot of grey areas when it comes to creativity. **There is always a subjective element to the appreciation (or otherwise) of creative work**, whether it’s a piece of fine art or the design of a new dishwasher.

Remember arguments you’ve had with friends about music or movies — it feels incredible that they don’t appreciate your favourite ‘masterpieces’, and that they rate works you would toss in the trash can.

Pick any creative discipline — including design — and you will come across arguments between experts about what excellence looks like.

What is the value of a design?

What criteria should we use for assessing a design?

What is the ‘best’ solution to a particular design challenge?

If the experts can’t always agree, it’s not surprising that groups of experts (designers) and non-experts (clients, bosses, etc) have trouble!

So when someone dismisses a piece of design in black-and-white terms (‘no good’, ‘terrible’), they usually don’t know what they are talking about.

3. Giving constructive feedback

Here are three questions to help you give genuinely constructive feedback on creative work:

- i. **Who** are you? In what capacity are you speaking?
- ii. **What** are your criteria for judgment?
- iii. **How** can you express these constructively?

As well as using these three questions yourself, make sure that everyone on your team understands and uses them.

i. Who?

There are few things designers hate more than having a non-designer make pronouncements on design as if they were experts. It destroys the speaker's credibility in their eyes and the working relationship may never recover.

When giving feedback always make your own role clear and explicit, so that you don't encroach on the territory of other professionals.

If you are a designer yourself, begin by saying something like:

“From a design perspective...”

If you are not a designer, you still have a valid point of view — just make it explicit where your feedback is coming from. For example:

“As a user, I look at this and think...”

“From my perspective as a non-designer, it strikes me as...”

“I can imagine a customer seeing this and feeling...”

By making your own role clear, you can express robust criticism of a piece of design, while still being respectful of the designer's expertise. This is not only more precise and useful feedback for the designer (reducing unnecessary **subjectivity**) it also helps to show respect for the designer as a person (helping to deal with **identification**) even as you critique his work.

ii. What?

Probably the biggest source of disagreement over creative work is the **lack of clear and agreed criteria** for judgment.

For example, a designer has focused on form and function, but the client doesn't like the colour, or the texture. Or a designer looks at the big picture of the overall layout of a page, while an editor is finicky about the fine detail of font size or kerning.

If you're not careful, the conversation can become enveloped in a fog of **subjectivity**, with everyone talking at cross-purposes, because they are basing their judgments on different criteria.

The way to get around this is to **start by making criteria explicit and getting agreement on these** — *before* you critique the work. This helps to remove the element of **subjectivity** — once you have agreed criteria, it gives you all a yardstick by which to start measuring the work.

Here are a couple of examples of what you might say:

“Okay, the critical point we’re looking at today is whether or not this new look communicates the new brand values in the brief.”

“At this stage we need to agree on whether the new prototype delivers the required functionality, not whether it looks good.”

Once you have established the criteria, you can then proceed to critique the work — being **as specific as possible**, and **spelling out your criteria** for each point. For example:

“So to me, the new look definitely communicates ‘integrity’, which is great, but I’m not sure I’d look at it and think ‘innovation’.”

“My concern is that the new model is working slower than the old one. Is that just because it’s a prototype, or is it an issue we’ll need to address?”

iii. How

How you phrase your feedback makes all the difference in the world.

To overcome the **identification** obstacle, it's essential that you **make it clear that you respect the designer, and you are critiquing their work**. Here are a few more tips for doing this.

Praise them directly, referring to their track record:

“John you’ve done a great job as usual, and you know how much I respect your work. In this instance, I’m going to argue for some changes...”

Thank them for their hard work:

“Sue, I’d firstly like to thank you for the effort and care I see you’ve taken over this.”

When it comes to the work, **begin with a positive**. It's only nature to want to get on and fix things that are broken, so easy to gloss over this.

“The thing I really like about this is...”

You must be sincere! Creatives are hard-wired to sniff out insincere praise. But if you have *genuine* respect for their expertise, effort and at least some aspects of the work in front of you, then take a moment to say so — it can make the whole conversation go much more smoothly.

3. Receiving feedback

In an ideal world everyone would give feedback using the principles I've just outlined. But in the real world you and your team have to deal with a lot of inept and sometimes even aggressive feedback.

So **you all need to be skilled at using these same three questions in reverse**, to clarify and transform the initial feedback into something specific, useful and actionable.

- i. **Who** is speaking?
- ii. **What** are their criteria?
- iii. **How** can you move the project forward?

i. Who

When someone gives you feedback, first **ask yourself who they are and what their role is in the process.**

If it's a fellow designer, you'll have a common professional language and set of values, which may make it easier to take their views on board.

If the feedback comes from a non-designer, you may need to make an effort to empathize with them and their priorities, especially if the feedback is clumsy or aggressive.

Ask yourself:

“What is this person's role in the process?”

“What is their specialism?”

“What are their priorities?”

“What are they anxious about?”

You may be surprised at some of the answers you come up with. For example, designers are often so nervous themselves they forget that making a business decision about a design can be nerve-wracking for a non-designer.

Sometimes the speaker is simply looking for reassurance that you understand their business problem. So if you stay calm and listen to their concerns it can alleviate their anxiety — and make them more open to your viewpoint.

Sometimes it's worth asking a question that explicitly invites them to contribute from their area of expertise:

“I've prepared this based on my knowledge as a designer, but I'd really like to get your input as a marketing person...”

If you're concerned that the person(s) who have given feedback don't really have the necessary skills and knowledge to make an informed judgment, it's worth getting a second opinion afterwards — even if only to reassure yourself!

And as a leader, providing an informed second opinion to a team member who is feeling 'shell-shocked' after a brutal feedback session is one of the most helpful things you can do.

ii. What?

It's easy to be defensive when faced with clumsy or aggressive criticism, but do your best to avoid this — it usually just leads to an argument.

Instead, **ask questions to clarify the speaker's criteria — and listen actively to the response.** Firstly, this shows confidence. Secondly, it communicates that you care about understanding their viewpoint (even if you don't agree with it!).

Start with something like:

“OK this is obviously important, so I want to be sure I understand exactly what you're concerned about. Are you saying...?”

When summarizing their criticism, repeat back their exact words — this will show that you have really listened to them.

Next, ask for specific criteria, and specific examples of what they like/dislike. Not only will this keep communicating that you value their opinion, it will also give you a clearer idea of what they want.

N.b. I'm *not* saying you should cave in to their demands. At this stage, you just want to establish what they want. Sometimes it turns out that agreement is closer than you feared.

Other times you will unearth a more significant disagreement. But having clear criteria will help you have a more constructive conversation about it.

iii. How?

No matter what you think of the feedback or the person delivering it, at the end of the day you and your team are the ones who have to deal with it. So the question at the front of your mind should be: **How are we going to move this project forward?**

Your goal is to end the conversation with a set of specific, actionable changes to be made. Clarifying roles and criteria as described above will help you achieve this.

Another powerful technique is to **ask solution-focused questions** that assume a positive outcome and invite people to focus on how to achieve it.

“Okay if I were to come back with a revised version that satisfied all your concerns, what would it look like? Please be as specific as possible, so I can be confident of giving you what you want.”

“So we’ve established that you currently think it looks too lightweight and flimsy. If I put together mockups with two different weights of heavier paper, would you be happy to review them and let me know which one you prefer?”

However tempting it is to get annoyed or defensive, try to stay focused on the goal of moving the project forward. At the very least, you’ll come across as professional under pressure, which will earn you respect from others in the room. And if you persist in looking for solutions and asking others to do the same, you give yourself the best shot at getting the best possible outcome.

4. Further reading

Articles

['Too Many Notes' – How Not to Give Feedback on Creative Work](#)

[5 Tips for Giving Feedback on Creative Work](#)

[What Seamus Heaney Taught Me about Giving Feedback on Creative Work](#)

[6 Tips for Dealing with Feedback on Your Own Creative Work](#)

[3 Ways to Assess Your Own Creative Work](#)

Ebook (free download)

[*Creative Management for Creative Teams*](#)

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