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Have you ever been in a conversation when someone said something inaccurate, you corrected them, and then they became defensive? Or you pointed out a colleague's shortcoming and discovered later they stopped talking to you because of it? Or you tried to help your spouse improve in some way which created hurt feelings and an argument? These experiences will cause you to quit giving corrective feedback, but is silence the better policy?

We all know we are not perfect. We know we can improve. So for good reason most great leaders and successful people solicit feedback. They ask colleagues, friends, coaches, and counselors for their observations and feedback. They seek validation they are doing things they should. They ask for corrective feedback on areas they need to work on. They are on a never-ending journey of self-improvement.

Because we constantly live with and are biased to accept ourselves, we tend to see the need for change more in others. Because we filter our self-perceptions with our self-rationalizations, we see improvement opportunities more objectively in others. Therefore we have insight that others can benefit from and they have insight we can benefit from. So does it make sense for us to only focus on ourselves to the limited extent we are able? Or should we try to help others and hope they will help us in return? Should we say what we see? Should we point out other's imperfections? Should we try to help others learn, grow, and change? At what point does someone's behavior or attitude justify our intervention?

The decision to correct someone can be difficult. There are many variables. There can be lasting consequences – both good and bad. Many people don't take corrective feedback well, especially when it isn't given well. Many bosses fail miserably when it comes to giving corrective feedback. Some prefer to fire their employees rather than give the feedback that their employees need to improve. Others give it, but in an overly direct and demeaning manner.

Next time you have an opportunity to give corrective feedback, consider these steps:

1. First, decide if something is worth pointing out. Ask yourself: Is the corrective feedback significant enough to justify giving it? Are the potential repercussions worth it? Is the feedback really going to be helpful to the person? Is the person open to feedback and likely to take it constructively? Is it something the person should change based on objective standards rather than my subjective values and interests? Is their behavior clearly wrong, dishonorable, or inferior? If these answers are yes, you have good justification to give corrective feedback. Also check your motives. Are you pointing out something because you are upset, jealous, or getting revenge? If so, walk away. Feedback is for their benefit, not yours.
2. If something is worth pointing out, next consider if you are the best person to do it? Have you earned the right to give corrective feedback? Do you have the authority – e.g. are you their parent, boss, or coach? Are you a trusted friend, colleague, or family member? If not, it probably isn't your place to give the feedback. Be especially careful with friends and family – particularly your spouse. Many friends, parents, siblings, and spouses don't want you trying to "fix" them. They want your support, empathy, and encouragement, not your criticism.

When Is it Your Business to Correct Someone?

3. If the person is aware of their issue, recognize that your role changes from creating awareness to providing support. Their need isn't for you to give corrective feedback. They already know their problem. Their need is for you to listen, understand, and relate to them. If they know they've made a mistake, they may need help learning how to avoid it in the future, but don't need reinforcement that they made a mistake. Turn your attention to helping them know what they can do going forward.
4. If you still think giving corrective feedback is a good idea, plan to do so in private. Follow the principle "praise in public, rebuke in private". Allow people to retain their dignity. Unless you're in a meeting where a decision is about to be made using incorrect information, save your correction for after the meeting. Being corrected in public is embarrassing. If you really care about your friends, colleagues, and family, don't embarrass them.
5. Formulate your words so they are gentle and constructive. Don't be so candid that you cause people to become defensive, shut down, or go on the counter attack. Be humble. When applicable, let people know up front that your feedback applies to yourself as well as others so they don't feel singled out or uniquely inferior. Say something like "I've given a lot of presentations similar to the one you just gave and also struggle at times to find accurate data." Or "I know showing empathy is difficult when you are angry – I'm the same way."
6. To further foster a climate of sincerity and collaboration, give the person an honest compliment. Say something like "Before we talk about your presentation data, let me say that you seemed poised and confident." Or "I was impressed with how well you handled your anger."
7. After establishing a positive climate, give your corrective feedback in unbiased factual terms. Leave out any embellishment or exaggeration. Leave out subjective judgement. Simply state your direct observations. Stick to the facts. Say something like "The market share data you presented wasn't current." Or "The person you were talking to felt disrespected because you showed little empathy."
8. After stating your observation, provide an example, story, or analogy that brings your point to life. Help the person understand the impact of what was said or done without making them feel like an idiot. Move the target of your feedback from the person to a third person or situation. Say something like "I once worked for a company that made a significant investment decision based on inaccurate market share data that eventually caused a multi-million dollar write off." Or "I remember when I would share an issue with my dad and he always went straight to trying to solve my issue rather than empathizing with me."
9. Conclude with sincerity and humility. Say something like "I don't mean to tell you how to research or present your data, but wanted to give you the benefit of my perspective. I hope this was helpful." Or "Please take this constructively. It may not have been my place to point this out, but I care about you and want you to be the best you can be."

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