

Helping People Grow

Learning to Give and Receive Truth with Grace

Introduction

I have never particularly enjoyed performance appraisals.

I suppose I enjoyed the ones that were glowing. Most of us do. But when someone pointed out an area where I needed to grow, I did not always hear it as helpful counsel. Too often, I heard it as rejection.

I wish I could say I outgrew that quickly. I didn't.

As I became responsible for leading and evaluating other people, I began to understand how complicated these conversations can be from the other side of the table as well. Early in my career, I remember sitting down with a woman who worked for me. She was doing a very good job, and there were many things about her work that I genuinely appreciated. There was also one area where she had a real gap.

I thought I handled the conversation pretty well. I told her several things she was doing well, talked with her about the one area that concerned me, and then reminded her of several more things I valued about her work.

She went home devastated.

When she came back the next day, I realized that she had barely heard the encouragement. Of everything we had discussed, the one thing she carried home was the criticism.

I understood that better than she probably knew.

That experience stayed with me. It taught me that telling the truth is only part of our responsibility to one another. We also need to learn

how to tell the truth in a way that gives another person the best opportunity to receive it. And those of us on the receiving end have something to learn as well. We need to become secure and mature enough to hear something difficult without immediately interpreting it as rejection.

Over the years, I have come to realize that this lesson reaches far beyond performance appraisals. We face these moments in our marriages and friendships, with our children, in churches, and with people we mentor or simply care about. Someone we love is making a choice that concerns us. A friend has a blind spot they cannot see. Someone has hurt us and may not realize it. Or perhaps we are the ones who need someone who loves us enough to tell us something we would rather not hear.

These conversations are rarely easy. But they are part of loving people well.

Hebrews tells us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). I have come to appreciate those words consider how. We are not simply told to spur one another on. We are asked to think about how we do it.

Who is this person? What do they need from me? How can I help them see something that may be difficult to see without diminishing them in the process?

Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is tell someone something they would rather not hear. At other times, what they need most is encouragement or simply the knowledge that someone sees what they have been carrying.

Jesus did both remarkably well.

When I look at the way He dealt with people, I see something much richer than a method for giving feedback. I see a way of helping people grow.

That is really what this paper is about.

What I See in the Way Jesus Helped People Grow

Jesus never seemed to deal with people mechanically.

Peter was not Nicodemus. Nicodemus was not the woman at the well. The rich young ruler was not Zacchaeus. Jesus knew whom He was speaking to, and He responded to the person and the moment in front of Him.

We see this especially clearly in Revelation 2–3, where Jesus speaks to seven churches in Asia Minor. Each had its own pressures, strengths, weaknesses, and spiritual condition. Jesus did not give all seven the same message.

Ephesus was hardworking and discerning. Jesus saw their perseverance and said so: “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance” (Revelation 2:2). Then He addressed what had been lost: they had left their first love.

Their weakness did not erase their faithfulness, and their faithfulness did not excuse their weakness. Jesus saw both.

Smyrna was suffering, and Jesus offered no correction. Philadelphia had “little strength,” yet He recognized its faithfulness (Revelation 3:8). Pergamum and Thyatira, on the other hand, were tolerating things that needed to be confronted. Sardis had a reputation for being alive while something very different was happening underneath. Laodicea could not see its own condition.

Jesus gave each one what it needed.

That has challenged me. Sometimes we become so accustomed to looking for something that needs improvement that we forget to tell faithful people they are doing well. There are people quietly carrying enormous loads who may already be painfully aware of their shortcomings. What they need from us may simply be, “I see what you are carrying. I see how faithfully you have handled it. Thank you.”

That is part of helping people grow too.

But encouragement is not the whole story. Jesus also loved people enough to tell them the truth.

He told the rich young ruler something the man did not want to hear, yet Mark tells us that Jesus “looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21). Those words belong together. Jesus loved him, and Jesus told him the truth.

The woman at the well encountered that same combination. Jesus did not humiliate her or pretend her life was something it wasn't. He spoke truthfully about it while continuing to engage her with dignity (John 4:7–26).

Perhaps that is part of what Paul meant when he wrote about “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

We need both.

Before We Say Something

There is an important question that comes before How should I say this?

Should I say it at all?

Not everything we notice about another person needs our commentary. Sometimes what bothers me about someone else says more about my preferences than it does about their character.

Before speaking, I have learned to ask myself a few questions. Is this really mine to say? Does it matter enough to say it? Am I concerned for this person, or am I simply irritated? Do I understand what happened well enough to speak about it? And have I earned enough trust in this relationship to say what I am considering saying?

Timing matters too.

There are truths that need to be spoken, but not necessarily at the first moment we feel like speaking them. Anger is rarely a good editor. Neither is embarrassment, especially when other people are present.

I think prayer belongs here. Before I try to address something in another person's life, I want God to deal with anything in mine that may distort the conversation.

Jesus' words about removing the plank from our own eye before addressing the speck in another person's eye are uncomfortable for a reason (Matthew 7:3–5). He was not telling us never to help someone see a problem. He was warning us to examine ourselves first.

That changes the way we enter the conversation.

When Something Needs to Be Said

Once we believe something genuinely needs to be said, I think simpler is usually better.

Talk about what you actually know rather than what you assume.

If a friend has repeatedly cancelled plans at the last minute, saying, “You don't value our friendship” assigns a motive. Saying, “The last few times we've made plans, you've cancelled just before we were supposed to meet, and I have to admit it has left me wondering whether something is wrong between us” opens a conversation.

The same principle works with a child.

Instead of, “You're irresponsible,” we might say, “We've talked several times about being home when you said you would be, and the last two times you were quite a bit later and didn't call. Help me understand what happened.”

And it certainly applies at work. “You don't communicate well” is very different from saying, “In our last several staff meetings, I noticed you interrupted people before they finished speaking. After a while, several people stopped contributing. Did you notice that too?”

Specificity gives another person something they can actually consider. Labels usually give them something to defend against.

Then listen.

This is where I think many difficult conversations go wrong. We spend so much time preparing what we are going to say that we forget the other person knows things we do not.

“Am I seeing this accurately?”

“Help me understand what was happening from your perspective.”

Those are simple questions, but they can change a conversation. Sometimes what we hear changes our understanding completely. Sometimes it doesn't. Either way, we have treated the other person with enough respect to listen.

And when change really is needed, kindness should not become vagueness.

I have seen leaders delay difficult conversations because they did not want to hurt someone. I have probably done it myself. Usually the delay did not help. The pattern continued, frustration grew, and eventually the conversation became harder than the one that could have happened earlier.

Jesus said to the church at Laodicea, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Revelation 3:19). His correction came from love, not rejection.

That distinction has taken me a long time to learn.

Don't Make the Conversation About Winning

When someone disagrees with us, there is a temptation to begin building a stronger case. We remember another example. Then another. Before long, what began as an attempt to help someone has turned into an argument we intend to win.

That rarely helps anyone grow.

The goal is not to prove that my interpretation is correct. The goal is to understand what is true and decide what to do with it.

That requires humility on both sides.

One question I have come to value, particularly when I am responsible for leading someone, is:

“How can I better support you?”

But the same spirit works outside the workplace.

A parent might ask, “Is there something you need from me that I’m not seeing?”

A husband or wife might ask, “Is there something I am doing that is making this harder?”

A friend might simply say, “How can I help?”

Questions like these do not remove personal responsibility. They communicate that we are not standing at a distance pointing out what is wrong. We are willing to look at ourselves and, when appropriate, walk with the person toward something better.

That is very different from simply delivering criticism and walking away.

Learning to Receive What We Would Rather Not Hear

There is another side to all of this, and for me it may have been the harder one.

We also have to learn how to receive truth.

For too many years, I had a tendency to hear correction as rejection. If nine things were positive and one was negative, I could somehow spend the evening thinking about the one. That was not always the fault of the person talking to me. Some of it was mine.

Part of growing as a leader, a spouse, a parent, a friend, or simply as a person is learning how to hear something difficult without allowing it to define us.

Proverbs says, “Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise” (Proverbs 15:31). I like that phrase life-giving correction. Correction can give life when we learn how to receive it.

That does not mean every criticism is right. People can misunderstand us. Someone can speak from hurt or incomplete information. Even people who love us can be wrong.

But I have learned that when something stings, my first response does not need to be my final response.

Instead of immediately explaining myself, I can ask, “Can you give me an example?” Or, “What are you seeing that I may not be seeing?”

And perhaps, when I am courageous enough:

“Is there anything else I need to hear?”

Then I can take some time. I can pray about it and ask someone I trust whether they have ever seen the same thing in me.

Not every criticism needs to be accepted as true. But if someone who knows me and cares about me has taken the risk of saying something difficult, I at least want to consider whether there is something there I need to learn.

I wish I had understood that much earlier.

When This Happens at Work

One place these principles become especially important is at work, because leaders have a responsibility to help people develop.

For years, organizations have placed enormous weight on the formal performance appraisal. I am no longer convinced the appraisal itself should carry that much responsibility.

The real work happens throughout the year.

When someone does something particularly well, tell them. When something concerns you, don't save it for six months. Ask about it while both of you still remember what happened. If a pattern needs to change, address it early enough that the person has a genuine opportunity to change it.

I have come to believe that nothing important in an annual appraisal should be a surprise.

If someone has been struggling for months and I have said nothing, I have to accept some responsibility for that. The same is true if someone has been doing exceptional work and has no idea whether I have even noticed.

Quarterly conversations can help. They need not be elaborate. Sit down long enough to ask how things are going, what has gone well, where the person may be struggling, and what support they need from you.

Then the annual appraisal becomes much healthier. It is not an ambush or a collection of grievances that have been stored away all year. It is a chance to look back together at conversations you have already been having and then look forward to where the person can continue to grow.

The difficulty has never really been the form.

It is learning to have the conversation well.

What I Wish I Had Learned Earlier

Looking back, I wish I had understood sooner that people do not always hear what I think I said. Surrounding a difficult truth with compliments does not guarantee that someone will hear the compliments or receive the truth. Genuine encouragement has value all by itself and should never become merely the prelude to criticism.

I wish I had asked more questions before reaching conclusions about people's motives. There were undoubtedly times when I thought I

understood what was happening and would have benefited from listening a little longer.

And on the receiving side, I wish I had understood that someone pointing out an area where I needed to grow was not necessarily rejecting me. Sometimes they were giving me something I needed, even when I did not particularly enjoy receiving it.

Those lessons came slowly.

Perhaps that is why I keep returning to Jesus.

He encouraged people who needed encouragement. He asked questions. He listened. He could be remarkably direct when truth needed to be spoken, yet He never seemed confused about the worth of the person standing in front of Him.

He saw people.

Maybe that is where helping people grow begins.

Whether the person in front of us is an employee, a spouse, a child, a friend, or someone we have been given the privilege of mentoring, our goal is not to win the conversation. It is to love them well enough to tell the truth when truth is needed and to listen when we may not have the whole story.

And when we find ourselves on the other side of that conversation, perhaps we can learn to receive the same gift.

Prayer

Lord,

Teach us to see people as You see them. Give us wisdom to know when someone needs encouragement and courage when something difficult needs to be said. Help us examine our own hearts first and recognize when silence would be wiser than speaking.

When we do need to speak, help us do it with kindness and genuine love for the person in front of us. Keep us from assuming we know

more than we do. Teach us to listen and to care more about the person than about proving our point.

And when we are the ones receiving correction, give us humility. Keep us from hearing rejection where someone may be trying to help us. Give us enough security to listen, wisdom to recognize what is true, and courage to change when change is needed.

May the people You entrust to our care know that we see them, value them, and desire Your best for their lives. Teach us to spur one another on toward love and good works and to do it in a way that reflects Your heart.

Amen.

Appendix

A Practical Rhythm for Helping People Grow at Work

The principles in this paper apply wherever people care enough about one another to speak honestly. The workplace simply adds a more formal responsibility: leaders are expected to develop people and, at times, evaluate their performance.

I would keep that process simple. The goal is to create a natural rhythm of conversation throughout the year so that a formal appraisal gathers together what leader and employee have already been discussing.

During the Normal Course of Work

Talk with people and pay attention.

When you see something worth encouraging, say so while it is still fresh. Be specific enough that the person understands what you appreciated. When something concerns you, ask a question before assuming you understand what happened.

A conversation might begin:

“I noticed what happened in that meeting. How did you think it went?”

Listen before deciding what needs to be said.

Not every informal conversation needs to be documented. A word of encouragement in the hallway certainly does not require a written record. But if the conversation involves a significant performance concern, an important commitment, or a recurring pattern that will require follow-up, make a short, factual note afterward. The purpose is not to build a case against someone. It is to remember accurately and follow through fairly. Formal documentation should follow the organization's personnel policies.

Quarterly

Set aside enough time that neither person feels rushed, but resist turning the quarterly conversation into a miniature annual appraisal.

Start by asking the person how they think things are going. What has gone particularly well? What has been difficult? Is anything getting in the way of their effectiveness?

Then share what you have noticed. Be specific about what you appreciate. If something needs attention, talk about it plainly, but don't manufacture a weakness because you think every quarterly conversation requires one.

This is also a good time to ask:

“How can I better support you?”

Before you finish, make sure both of you understand any important next steps. A brief note about commitments or follow-up is usually enough.

When Correction Is Needed

Do not wait until the next scheduled review if the issue matters now.

Before the conversation, make sure you understand what actually happened, that expectations were reasonably clear, and that you are calm enough to be helpful.

Describe what you observed and why it matters, then ask the other person for their perspective:

“Here's what I've been noticing and why it concerns me. Help me understand what you're seeing.”

If change is needed, say so clearly. Being vague because we are uncomfortable rarely helps anyone. Ask what support would help, agree on what needs to happen next, and decide when you will talk again.

Significant or recurring performance concerns should be documented appropriately and handled according to organizational policy.

Annually

The annual appraisal should gather up conversations that have already occurred, not reveal a hidden list of concerns the leader has been saving all year.

Look back together at the person's contribution, accomplishments, growth, struggles, and commitments. Talk about what has changed and where further development would be helpful.

Then look forward. Where could this person grow? What opportunities might stretch them? What support do they need? What would both of you like to be able to look back on a year from now and be grateful has happened?

A good annual conversation should leave people knowing where they stand, knowing their contribution has been seen, and understanding what comes next.

When You Are Receiving Feedback

Listen all the way through before defending yourself.

If something is unclear, ask for an example. If you disagree, make sure you understand what the other person is actually saying before explaining why you see it differently.

If the feedback hurts, you do not have to settle everything in the moment. Take some time to think and pray about it. Come back to the conversation if necessary. Ask yourself whether there is something here you need to learn.

And when you are uncertain, ask someone who knows you well:

“Have you ever seen this in me?”

Feedback does not determine your worth. But it may reveal something that helps you grow.

One Final Thought

The person across the table is more important than the appraisal.

Forms and ratings have their place, but they are only tools. The real responsibility is the person sitting in front of us.

Pay attention to what is good. Care enough to tell the truth when something needs to change. Listen to what they have to say in return.

And then stay close enough to help them grow.

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