



Mutual Positive Feedback



Teamwork, feedback, feedforward, appreciation, self-confidence, generosity, wellbeing

What is this?

This is an appreciation and positive feedback exercise designed to help students focus on their fellow students' and their own strengths and to increase everyone's wellbeing.

Why is this important?

From a learning perspective, research has established that strengths-oriented feedback has a far more powerful effect than feedback that focuses on correcting shortcomings. This is partly because negative feedback is often perceived as a threat, thereby generating a limbic response¹ that places the individual in a defensive stance where he is more concerned with finding an excuse than with overcoming the difficulty.

Reciprocal positive feedback is also important for teamwork, as it reinforces mutual trust between team members.

Last but not least, positive, strengths-oriented feedback is instrumental for well-being, because it contributes not only the self-confidence of those who receive it but also to feelings of gratification and contentment of those who give it. Positive feedback is an act of generosity, and research shows that generosity is one of the most powerful and lasting drivers of personal well-being.

What can I use it for?

The roundtable positive feedback can be used to wrap up any team activity – e.g. a team project, a group problem-solving exercise, taking part in a team contest, etc.

In more protracted undertakings like a project spanning a longer period, this activity can be performed repeatedly (ideally at the end of each stage) to take advantage of its incremental results.

At the individual level, it can be used to boost the motivation and self-confidence of a student who has been underperforming or struggling to keep up.

How can I use it?

Please refer to the detailed instructions on the next pages.

See also the final notes on tips and advice.

¹ In this case, an instinctive and unconscious "fight or flight" reaction triggered by the limbic system, a group of brain structures (including the hippocampus, the amygdala and the hypothalamus) that evolved in archaic animals as a response to an immediate threat such as an aggression.



Mutual Positive Feedback – Instructions

Preliminary note

This is a **reciprocal** feedback exercise where every participant receives feedback from everybody else, with individual members **taking turns** at receiving feedback from their peers. Therefore, in order to keep it short and within the students' concentration span, it must be carried out in small groups with no more than 4 members.

In a large group, the exercise can be run simultaneously for several small groups.

Setup

1. Arrange as many circles of 4 chairs as needed for the entire group. Forego using tables: the exercise works much better without them, as participants sit closer to each other and non-verbal cues become more visible.
2. Divide the participants in groups of 4 and ask them to sit facing each other.



Briefing

3. Explain the exercise: each participant is going to sit and listen in turn to the feedback she is going to receive from her peers in the same circle of chairs. Once she has received feedback from all the other three, it's another one's turn to listen, and so on until all four have received feedback.
4. When giving feedback, each participant must mention:
 - 4.1. **Three behaviours** or attributes of the person receiving feedback that are highly appreciated because for their **strong positive impact on the team's atmosphere and performance**.
 - 4.2. **One behaviour** or attribute that is not as strong a contribution as the previous three, **with a little improvement, would rank up with them**.
5. The person receiving feedback is not allowed to react to what he hears and must **remain in silence** and focused on listening. When any one of his peers finishes giving her feedback, he must answer "Thank you for your feedback". These are the only words he can say. The facilitator must explain that what they are hearing may seem off the mark from their own standpoint, but it's the way others see them and must be **cherished as a valuable gift** since it offers them a chance of **knowing themselves better**.
6. Before starting the rounds of feedback, the participants are given some time (@ 5 to 10 minutes) to reflect on the feedback there are going to give their peers.



Supervision

7. Throughout the 4 rounds of feedback, the facilitator must make sure that the persons receiving feedback remain silent and do not yield to the temptation to react on the feedback they are receiving. (Most often, this occurs because they want to bring up circumstances that would explain why the fourth behaviour is not as positive as the other three.)
8. The facilitator must also keep close tabs on time and check that the rounds of feedback are not falling behind schedule.



Debriefing

9. The facilitator asks for some comments on how the participants feel. Was the feedback useful? Did they feel appreciated? Was there a contribution they hadn't realised was that important for the team? And how did they feel about giving feedback?
10. It's crucial at this stage to avoid slipping into a discussion on the accuracy of the comments. That is not at all what the exercise is about.

Tips and advice

11. This exercise is recommended for older students only (i.e. high school/senior school, perhaps in some cases middle school depending on maturity). Identifying meaningful contributions as well as formulating suggestions for improvement without sounding derogatory is beyond younger children's reach, and above all they will find extremely difficult to keep quiet while listening to their peers' remarks. A recommended, more straightforward alternative is the "Appreciation Exercise" described in another resource.
12. Time keeping is important. Since each participant receives comments from the other 3, there are 12 comments in total. Assuming an average of 1:00 minute per comment, the 4 rounds of comments will take 12 to 15 minutes with some slack, plus another 5 to 10 minutes for the initial individual reflection and still some extra time for the debriefing. To avoid overruns, it's crucial that the facilitator instructs the participants to keep their comments sharp and to the point.
13. Older, more mature students who can grasp the difference, must be encouraged to formulate three positive contributions in terms of **dynamic, instrumental behaviours** rather than **traits** or extant qualities – e.g. "makes us look at the facts", "shares her knowledge", "keeps looking for innovations" as opposed to "critical thinker", "bright and knowledgeable" or "creative". The reason for this is grounded on the difference between "growth mindset" and "fixed mindset" developed by Carol Dweck, according to whom praising successful learning strategies leads to better learning outcomes and a more lasting learning attitude than praising talent seen as a fixed, effort-independent quantity.

Running the exercise online

This exercise can be easily run online, in a videoconference platform like Zoom or Teams, with breakout groups instead of circles of chairs.

The facilitator is advised to pop in in the difference breakout rooms to check if the rules are been followed (see nos. 4 & 5) and if the right pace is being kept.