

“Have you any notes for me?”

- giving and receiving presentation feedback

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Presenting is a deeply personal experience. Hearing feedback on your presentation from peers, no matter how much you respect them, is a deeply personal experience. But this feedback, or “notes” as they commonly call them in the theatre, is a really important part of your continuous professional development as a presenter. Here are some tips to help presenters take and give constructive feedback in a sensitive way.

Receiving feedback

1. Adopt a mind-set that even the best presenters never stop reflecting, learning and improving their performances – you and your presentation will always be “works in progress”.
2. Choose the people you ask to give feedback with care. Sometimes the best presenters are not the same as the best presentation trainers. Good trainers will distinguish between feedback relating to your individual style and notes about your technique.
3. Assume that the feedback is being offered constructively and objectively, and consciously monitor your reaction to it so that you remain open to hearing other people’s ideas. Avoid becoming defensive and closed.
4. Equally, work hard to avoid fixating on the negative feedback and ignore the positive feedback - this is what we all tend to do as an automatic response, but it can be very harmful to our development as presenters. A key element of your presentation is how confident you appear to the audience – don’t let insensitive or clumsy feedback destroy your fragile confidence.
5. Ask questions and clarify any comments you do not understand. Respectfully encourage the reviewer to discuss possible solutions as well as simply raising issues of concern.
6. Remember that it is only their response to a single performance, and rather than make dramatic changes in light of any one note, seek recurring themes which emerge from several different people that you trust. You have the final say on which notes you decide to act on – it’s your choice.
7. Keep a *presentation journal* to record your reflections and any feedback received. This makes it easier to monitor your progress and allows you to spot issues which keep being raised.

Giving feedback

1. It is generally not considered professional to offer unsolicited feedback directly to a presenter, unless it is about a serious safety concern, and even this should be done with caution.
2. Be sensitive and sincere in how you offer feedback at all times. The more trusting and supportive a relationship you can develop with the presenter, the more likely he or she will respond, rather than resist, your suggestions. The one outcome you must avoid, at all costs, in giving feedback is destroying the confidence of the presenter.
3. In a pre-arranged evaluation, be absolutely clear on the criteria you will be using to review the presentation – ideally you should be working from an agreed list of points to consider. It is also vital to find out at what stage of development both the presentation and the presenter are at *before* you begin to offer notes. Without this knowledge, you cannot possibly offer feedback that is appropriate and helpful for that stage of development and for the confidence level of the presenter.
4. Giving feedback when someone is still buzzing after a presentation is usually not the best time to engage in an objective discussion and critique of the performance. Try to choose a time and venue to give notes where you and the presenter can concentrate and discuss issues openly. Written notes, although allowing for more detailed feedback, can be much more easily misinterpreted by the presenter than face-to-face discussions.
5. No matter how much you want to try and help “fix” what appear to you to be obvious presentation problems, don’t give too much feedback at once. This can be confusing and overwhelming for the presenter, and actually deeply counter-productive. Identify a couple of the most important strengths and a few of the most significant areas for development and focus on describing these clearly, explaining why they are important, and then exploring ways forward.
6. Be specific and clear in all of your comments. Your aim is to help the presenter to develop their skills - vague comments can only lead to insecurity and confusion.
7. Try to avoid being dogmatic in your views and strive to encourage an open, two-way exchange of views and ideas. Presenting is a gloriously subtle and complex process which depends on many different factors related to the environment, the audience, the presenter, and the content of the presentation. Remember that what works for one presenter, may fail horribly for another presenter, and vice versa.

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