The objective of a manager providing constructive feedback is to improve an employee's performance. This is something both employee and manager are aligned on — over time, a manager wants to work with a better and better employee, and an employee wants career growth and personal development. Yet, we don't like giving negative feedback and we don't like receiving it.

We've tried to soften the blow of criticism by changing the label and calling it a "conversation," not a meeting. We call it constructive, not negative feedback, which works as a best practice only when the bad news is actually delivered in a constructive way. Every employee knows exactly what's coming when their manager sends the "we need to talk" email. Even the "compliment sandwich" approach — slipping the bad news in between two positive things — is thinly veiled and can leave employees feeling as if their manager is trying to hide something.

Rather than dancing around corrective conversations, it's better to develop a deep understanding of why these interactions make us uncomfortable and address the root problem. Many are surprised to learn that feeling good after a critical conversation is possible, and acquiring this skill gives managers a step up in the leadership game.

Why We Don't Like Constructive Feedback

At work, the fight-or-flight mentality manifests itself as arguing or shutting down. An employee made a mistake, and when her manager points it out, she fiercely defends the lapse in judgment that led to the mistake, or switches to smiling and nodding until it's over. Why?

Research shows that a [social threat activates](#) the same part of our brain as, say, putting one's hand on a hot plate. That explains why performance reviews can induce so much anxiety — the brain is literally lighting up as if one's well-being is in danger.

Online communication has innovated the inefficiency out of almost every discussion, but the constructive conversation is one that needs to be inefficient by nature.

All the Common Misconceptions

Most managers react to the discomfort by delivering constructive feedback as quickly as possible, then moving on to more palatable topics. But corrective feedback is like an iceberg — the content itself is the tip, only 10 percent of the interaction.

In fact, a study showed that 74 percent of employees knew there was a problem before their [manager delivered](#) any bad news. If an employee missed quarterly goals or a project failed to produce results, it's not going to be a surprise when a manager calls a meeting to discuss. The employee knows what went wrong and probably has an idea of how to solve the issue — the anticipation is waiting to see *how* their manager approaches the topic.

Some even better news for managers is that more employees said they preferred corrective feedback over positive (57 percent to 43 percent) and 72 percent said they thought corrective feedback would improve their performance.

Employees know what the criticism will be, and want to have the conversation. For the feedback giver, this should be reaffirming. The hard work is done before you even start.

How to Give Feedback Painlessly

Because the discomfort in receiving feedback (even when a person already knows what it is!) activates a fight-or-flight mentality, it's important to get the cognitive basics right.

First, be sure the receiver maintains a sense of control, which in turn gives them a sense of safety. Corrective conversations should always be scheduled, and even better if the receiver is able to pick the day and time. Citing the goal — i.e. "I want to follow up on this project to improve the execution of the next one" — keeps the conversation forward-thinking rather than putting up an employee's defenses.

Second, be sure to use supporting examples. Without examples, the conversation becomes about intent instead of results. If a manager wants an employee to improve on timeliness, the conversation should be about the 2-3 projects that were turned in late. A manager oversteps bounds by attributing reasons to the issue such as a lack of planning, which can cause the employee to feel like she has to defend her intentions.

Conversely, a feedback conversation can be spun to activate the reward part of the brain, according to [NeuroLeadership Institute](#) director David Rock.

"Our research shows that about 75 percent of the time you can get people to give themselves feedback, and we call it self-directed 'feed forward' rather than feedback. Giving themselves feedback, is actually a status reward for them, rather than a status threat."

A two-way conversation allows the receiver to regain status by taking responsibility for a mistake and pitching their own solution.

Lastly, corrective feedback can become less painful when it's presented in a culture of trust. A ratio of [3:1 positive to negative feedback](#) creates a culture where feedback is not only appropriate, but expected. Affirmations being sent is the norm, and employees feel their best interests are being served by constructive feedback.

Good feedback delivery takes practice, but it is an essential leadership skill. Because constructive feedback is about so much more than the criticism content itself, it cannot be taken online. Managers who master these conversations will find themselves with higher-performing teams and set apart as accomplished leaders.