

# Delivering a Difficult Message: Performance Feedback in a Family Business

By: David Ransburg  
The Family Business Consulting Group

**“My brother is not pulling his weight at work, which means more work for our mother and me. I don’t know what to do about it... so I do nothing, and the problem persists.”**

For most people in most situations, delivering a difficult message is, well, difficult. Delivering a difficult message in a family business is typically even more challenging because of the multiple and deeply personal relationships that exist. Difficult messages must be delivered, though, and avoiding this task will likely only make matters worse. With the long-term success of the family business at stake in situations like this one, it’s essential to deliver those messages effectively.

We should remind ourselves why we want to give feedback in the first place and what it is we hope to accomplish by doing so. The need to deliver a difficult message typically starts with your perception that you have a disagreement with someone else or their performance is falling short of your standards. Since performance feedback is one of the most difficult messages to deliver to family members, we will address that specific case.

Your goals in delivering this difficult message are (1) to share your perspective in a way that your recipient will understand it, (2) to learn the other person’s perspective of the same situation, and then (3) to ensure that the performance shortfall is addressed so that sustained success can be achieved for the family and their business.

## Soft start-up

Effectively delivering a difficult message requires work before the message is actually delivered. If you simply

launch into your message, you will likely ambush the recipient... and most who are ambushed will be defensive and therefore not receive your message as well as they otherwise might. Using a “soft start-up” will help you to minimize this particular challenge and increase the chances that your message will be received as well as it can be.

A “soft start-up” introduces the idea of sharing feedback even before you actually deliver the message. In our example, if your sibling isn’t pulling their weight at work, you could introduce the discussion by saying: “There’s something I’ve been thinking about, and I want to share it with you. I feel it’s an important item and therefore will take us more than just a minute or two to discuss. When would be a good time for you to have this discussion with me?”

In my experience, recipients of the above request typically find time to talk in short order. However, if the recipient tries to delay the conversation significantly, then you can simply respond: “This matter is too important to wait that long. When could you find some time to talk in the near future?”

## Sharing your perspective

Once you’ve established a time to meet (in a comfortable and private location), it’s now time to begin delivering your message. I have found that the most effective way to initiate the conversation is with a question: “I’d like to share some feedback that I hope is helpful. Is that

okay with you?” In theory, the recipient could say “no,” and the conversation will come to a stop. Practically speaking, though, I’ve never encountered a situation where the recipient responds with anything other than a simple “yes.”

Asking for permission is important for a couple of reasons. First, it explicitly communicates to the recipient that you are about to deliver a potentially sensitive message to them. This gives them a few moments to prepare which will make it more likely that they will actually hear what you have to say. Second, you will feel more comfortable providing the specific feedback. You have, after all, just received explicit permission to do so!

After receiving permission to proceed, the most effective way to deliver the difficult message is using the following framework: “When you [describe the recipient’s troubling behavior], I feel [describe the emotions – some combination of happy, sad, angry, and scared – that the recipient’s troubling behavior triggers in you].”

The value of this simple framework is that it focuses on the recipient’s behavior (which is changeable), rather than their personality (which is not). It also allows the recipient to see how their behavior impacts others (namely you).

In the example that opens this article, this framework might be used as follows: “When you put in fewer hours at work and, as a result, are not as productive as the rest of us, I feel angry, sad, and scared. Angry because I feel like you are taking advantage of me, sad because I feel like I cannot trust you or depend on you like I once could, and scared because we are losing ground to our competitors who, presumably, have all of their key employees working their hardest.”

### Offer to partner

Now that you have shared your perspective with the recipient, invite them to share their perspective of the situation with you. Occasionally, this step will provide the deliverer with important additional information that can clear up differences quickly. Even if this additional information does not resolve the situation, both parties now have the more complete picture that is necessary for improving matters.

While it might be tempting for the deliverer to walk away at this point – the bad behavior is, after all, the

recipient’s problem – remember our third goal for having this conversation: ensure that the performance shortfall is addressed. Walking away at this point could provide the recipient with an “out.” If you sincerely want to increase the likelihood of addressing the recipient’s performance shortfall, you need to stay involved. So, offer to partner with the recipient as they begin to work on addressing the bad behavior. Depending on the specific issue, there is a virtually endless list of ways you can provide assistance, but a great way to start is to ask the recipient the following question: “What keeps you from [doing the desired behavior]?” Framing the bad behavior in terms of constraints typically leads the recipient to be more open to discussing the issues. Once you understand the constraints that the recipient faces in addressing this situation, you can best suggest specific options for improvement.

In our current example, asking the constraints question might reveal that the recipient is kept from pulling his weight at work because he feels he’s been placed in a position for which he is not qualified. If so, possible solutions might include a structured training and development program or putting the recipient into a different position for which he is sufficiently qualified. If, on the other hand, “What keeps you from pulling your weight at work?” reveals a different constraint (e.g., serious health issues afflicting the recipient’s spouse), then an entirely different set of solutions would be appropriate.

### Timeouts when flooded

Even the most carefully planned conversations don’t always go well. The above steps will certainly increase your likelihood of having a productive conversation, but there’s no way to guarantee success. And, in those occasions where the conversation falls apart, it’s important to have an appropriate tool: timeouts.

Difficult conversations are often challenging because they involve emotions and emotions can sometimes get out of control. In those instances when we lose control of our emotions – a situation that I refer to as being “flooded” – the best solution is to borrow from the sports world and call a timeout. When one is flooded, one does not think clearly. As a matter of fact, research in the field of neuroscience shows that one’s IQ typically drops when flooded and a flooded individual also loses access to the area of the brain where logical thinking resides. If

one of our goals for having a difficult conversation is to ensure that the performance shortfall is addressed, then both parties need to be at their best when engaging in this conversation. And, if just one participant becomes flooded, then both parties are clearly not at their best.

The most effective solution in this situation is to call a timeout and take a break from the conversation. Once both parties have had a chance to clear their heads – a process that usually involves something as simple as each participant taking a brief walk alone – they can resume the conversation. If the situation becomes flooded again, simply call another timeout! It may take some time to make progress via small periods of productive conversation, but trying to press on while even one participant is flooded will lead to no progress at all (and, potentially even a setback)!

### Catch them doing right

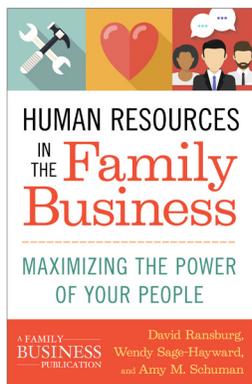
Speaking of neuroscience research, there's significant evidence that positive feedback is more effective than negative feedback. While it's true that sharing your perspective on what the recipient is doing wrong can help them to avoid derailing, shifting the focus to dreams

and possibilities will allow the recipient to flourish. As leading researcher Richard Boyatzis says, "You need the negative focus to survive, but a positive one to thrive."

So, as you and the recipient work together on their performance improvement, don't just let them know when they make mistakes (which they undoubtedly will as they first attempt to change their behavior) – also be sure to point out to them when they are behaving in the right way. An example in our case: "I've noticed that you've been putting in more hours at work recently and, as a result, that your productivity has increased." If you can catch them doing right, you will increase their likelihood of behaving correctly more often.

### In closing

For anyone involved with a family business, delivering a difficult message is challenging but necessary. While there is no process that can guarantee success in these precarious situations, the steps laid out above can significantly increase your likelihood of achieving the ultimate goal: improved performance that leads to sustained success for the family and their business.



### Recommended Reading

#### Human Resources in the Family Business: Maximizing the Power of Your People by David Ransburg, Wendy Sage-Hayward and Amy Schuman

The tricky issues faced by family businesses are often centered on people – both in and out of the family – and involve multiple, complex, interrelated systems with many nuances. How these situations are addressed will dramatically influence the enterprise's culture and performance, as well as family relationships now and into the future.

*Human Resources in the Family Business* shows how HR practices can help family firms achieve their values-driven goals as a family and a business. Filled with case studies, frameworks and practical tools, this book addresses how to successfully anticipate and manage people issues and opportunities. Visit [www.thefbcg.com](http://www.thefbcg.com) for details.

**David Ransburg** is a senior consultant of The Family Business Consulting Group and can be reached at [ransburg@thefbcg.com](mailto:ransburg@thefbcg.com) or 847.274.6336.

To learn more about The Family Business Consulting Group and how we serve families like yours, call us at (773) 604-5005 or email us at [info@thefbcg.com](mailto:info@thefbcg.com). There is absolutely no obligation.

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