Translation: Neumann Solow "Giving Feedback" Presentation translated by Kathryn Bennett, MA, CI

Clip 3. Giving Feedback

Today I plan to talk about how we can give feedback. It's really important for analysis and planning and is effective and useful. I want to talk about the very important initial point of separating oneself from one's work. If I can separate myself from my work, this is helpful to the other person I am giving feedback to because they can see the feedback is about their work and is not on a personal level. It enables them to see the work and who they are as a person are separate. This separation really helps in both receiving and giving feedback.

First, we need to talk about "the work," or the interpretation itself. The first point is that we use languages, and that influences how people see us and how we see ourselves related to work. If it is always about "my work" or "my choices," that really affects me and creates a state of mind where who I am is equal to my work. We can use language to help create more of a separation. We can also do that through our actions. For instance, there can be a lot less comparison. Comparing ourselves to others is sometimes helpful to see things that we might want to do more often, or do in a particular way, or do less of. But, the basic idea is that comparing ourselves to others is not effective. A second point is that we have to take care of ourselves. If we take care of ourselves, we are strengths within us for taking on the world or whatever may come our way. That includes challenges in communication, related with feedback or giving feedback. Thirdly, if we build our feeling of worth inside not based on our work, but solely on who I am as a person and the inherent value that brings, for no other reason than that. It really helps us to receive and give feedback in a healthy way. A fourth point is that I really encourage everyone to find something else to do. Interpreting is extremely worthwhile, but there are other things that need to supplement that. For instance, perhaps a hobby or something fun or play-based. We can do our work even better if we can do something else well. Perhaps you are extremely gifted at sewing. So, let's say, after an extremely frustrating time interpreting, you can always have that to go to. When you put interpreting and the hobby together, you can feel satisfied as a result. Or, you can try a new hobby. That gives me practice at feeling frustrated with something. Also, it gives me practice at ultimately achieving success, despite the hardship. So, doing other things than work is important for achieving balance in life, for learning how to navigate through frustrations, and for learning how to feel good about something despite having a negative experience. So, there are many different reasons as to why it is important.

While we talk to each other, be it vocal or signing, there are some things in the feedback that are easier to accept than others. I'll make a comparison to give you an idea of what I am talking about. Something that is easier to accept is when a person says something in a descriptive manner. That's very helpful. Descriptions are a little bit more neutral and not necessarily so pointed. A second possibility is that the feedback is based on a solution, as opposed to a litany of specific points.

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Instead, it is in the form of a solution, or how something can be fixed. Thirdly, if the people involved feel as if they are peers that is much more helpful than if the perception is that one person is more important, or more intelligent, or better than the other person. Feeling as if we are on equal terms is helpful in terms of receiving feedback and accepting what another person may say. Another point to consider is that if I feel the person who is giving me comments or feedback is supportive of me, I am more likely to be accepting of what they have to say. In addition, having an open mind and a willingness to listen, it makes it much easier to receive the feedback. It is more difficult to hear and receive feedback when you feel that within an interaction someone is evaluating or judging you. That is going to really make a person defensive or make them not want to accept what they have to say. If the person who is giving feedback acts superior, that makes it difficult to accept the comments. If the person says something in such a way that are unequivocal and that what they a saying is absolutely, without question correct, that makes me doubt what they are saying.

Therefore, how much stock am I going to put into what they have to saying? It is impossible for them to be right all of the time. Also, if the person providing feedback is trying to control you, it is difficult to accept their feedback. There is an ulterior motive behind their feedback, such as trying to influence you or manipulate you, that will create a sense of defensiveness. If I feel that person is talking right at me, in my face, and in a personal way, that will make me feel very defensive. If it's talk about "my family" or "my husband" that's very personal and will make me react in a such a way that I will not be open to their feedback.

Finally, if the person giving feedback is trying to control the other person, that is problematic. There are really many others, but those are some that helped me to look at different feedback situations and get a sense of what they are all about. It helps me to see that it is better when the communication is strong and clear. If there is ambiguity or poor communication, it can really hurt and influence the choices we make.

Next, I'd like to go over my suggestions for how to use language for feedback. It is better to use language that is about "the work." I can say "the work" or "the task." Or, I can talk about the interpretation or the transliteration, if you are looking at a videotape for instance. Also, I can talk about "the performance," "that strategy," "the approach to that problem" or how that work was organized. A less effective use of language, which I recommend taking out of the vocabulary of feedback, is "you" or "your." Suppose I were to say, "You signed…" That is not effective and needs to be changed to something like "The work has _____ within it." Just as "you" is not effective, "he, she, her, his" and such need to be excluded as well. You can also use a phrase such as, "The work shows evidence of _," to give feedback. Before I might have said, "You did a good job fingerspelling." Now, I would change that to say that the work shows evidence of fingerspelling competence. And that is more neutral, and less personal. Statements that are

more personal are actually less helpful. For instance,statements that begin with "You did …" For instance, feedback of "You did a lot of sighing" is more personal and pointed. Statements such as "The work had evidence of…" are much more neutral. So, the example just given could be "The interpretation had a number of sighs in it" instead. You can also say something like "I saw _____." As a person giving feedback, I am not be perfect and may have misunderstood something. But, if I say that I saw something in the work or heard that in the work, it is much more neutral. In the case of the previous example, it could be stated as "I saw lots of sighing in the work" as opposed to "You really sighed too much." The latter is, in effect, more personal and more negative. It's also helpful to use words like feedback instead of criticism. Clearly, with words like criticism, the person will have set up in their minds that it is all negative. Feedback is a much better term. I think it is also often helpful to use terms that are positive in their connotation, such as "remember." Feedback takes the form of "Remember …", rather than "You forgot…" or "Don't forget…" Another example is "You should…" Instead a more positive statement is "What about this idea…." Sometimes people tend to say "If I was in your place, I would have …" It's better to just make the suggestion, which can be stated as "Maybe a more successful idea would be…" or "A more successful option might be.." This is better than stating what you would do in a situation. It's not helpful to give feedback about what I might do or what I would always do. It's just not helpful, because a person is not going to feel open in that situation. It's also not helpful to say not to do something. That's almost like a mother or teacher. The person who is receiving that feedback is apt to be defensive. Also, I am still thinking about the word "good." To say something like "That was good work" is alright, I think. Although, it seems to be more commonplace now to use the word "successful." The reason for that is because successful implies that the elements needed to create a successful interpretation were present in that work. Using the term "not successful" is more neutral than "bad" or "wrong." Along the same lines, again, be careful with the term "right". Because where there is right, there must be wrong. Terms like "successful" or "effective," and maybe "good" are useful. Right and wrong, though, I think should be avoided.

There are also many things to help make feedback more effective. In my observations, the best feedback occurs when both people are helping each other improve and when they trust each other. They each feel a desire for the other person to be successful. That leads to strong, good feedback. I think it is also helpful when the two people have share a relationship and there is a mutual desire for success. It also helps when the two people cooperate with each other and there is an environment of cooperation established. Also of importance is the absence of defensiveness. It's important to try to avoid arrogance or self- aggrandizement. Or, trying to cover feelings of inadequacy with bravado. It's important, instead to be completely open with the other person. Having that openness, communication, and relationship is much more effective in the giving and receiving of feedback. In addition, it's important to

analyze and recognize one's reasons and motivations behind the feedback. This involves getting rid of any inappropriate reasons, such as wanting to look better than the other person, or a desire for the other person to feel good or to like me. I have to rid myself of all of those kinds of reasons and focus in only on providing feedback simply for the purpose of being helpful. There are a lot underlying reasons sometimes that influence or affect the feedback we give. We must increase our awareness so as not to overlook things.

Sometimes there are things that come up that we miss if we are not paying attention. For example, if I don't notice a facial expression in the person giving me feedback, I may automatically be defensive from what they have said because I missed that facial expression that went along with it. So, by being aware and observant, we are ready to recognize everything. This can help me understand that person's feelings, as well as my own. Also, I have to keep in mind the larger goals that are going on within this work. And I say that because while we are working with someone, their needs may be change over the course of time. I have to keep in mind what their present goals are. At another time, there may be a completely different set of goals. It's important, then, to keep those goals in mind. If the goals are not kept in focus, the range of what we could talk about would be incredibly broad. Instead, by remembering the goals, we are able to focus on one particular part of the work at that time. The final point, which I will emphasize over and over again, is that we must focus on the work and not on the person. Focusing on the work really helps break down any defenses and people are much more accepting.

I encourage you to use positive words and positive thoughts. One thing that my mother always did say was to think positively. People are influenced when they hear things in a much more positive way. Another reminder is that how often we overlook the things the person does well and effectively. There can be a whole list of those. Instead of seeing them, though, we tend to zero in only on those things that may have gone wrong. We focus and pick out a breakdown, or diverting from the meaning, or an error. It's important for us to focus in on what has worked well and what has been done right. I used the word "right," so disregard that! In other words, it is a matter of focusing in on what has been effective and the things we have seen that we want to keep in the work. Often, some interpreters, especially beginning interpreters won't realize all of the things that are working for them. We need to make sure we attend to those so that we keep those effective components in the work, as well as the fact that doing so is supportive.

Okay, let's say it is time for a feedback session and the two people sit down. Right off the bat, the person who is receiving the feedback puts up walls and is defensive. And you try hard to be open and do everything we've talked about so far. Yet, that person is just really defensive. At that point, do you continue to give feedback? In my opinion, you don't. You should not force a person to receive feedback. Perhaps it has just been a bad day. Maybe that person is not feeling

well, had a bad day yesterday, or broke up with their boyfriend five minutes before the meeting. They may have a reason as to why they are not able to accept the feedback at that time. Or, maybe they never wanted to receive feedback in the first place. I feel it is so important to remember that feedback is like a gift. It's not a requirement that you give feedback to another person. It's just like a gift. If that person is not able to receive it, then you take the gift and give it to someone else. I know that sometimes in a class or other situations, feedback must be given. It's a requirement of some kind. But, there is no way to force someone to actually accept it if they are not able to. I also think it is critical for us to realize that when I am on the receiving end and someone is giving me feedback, it is a gift. And something for which I feel extremely grateful. If you want more feedback, then just show your appreciation when you've gotten it. I guarantee you'll get more.

One other point is to avoid looking at another person and making a value judgment. There are two examples…No, actually just one. You know when a person is signing or voicing and the interpretation choice they make is not necessarily the choice you would make. In their position, I might choose a different word, or phrase, or sign. If the choice that they have made works, then don't say anything at all. That doesn't need to be changed. Keep your mind open to the realm of different possibilities for an interpretation. There's not just one right answer, right? So we need to be open to the whole continuum of choices that can made. And perhaps within that continuum you and another person will make different choices. But, there is no point in discussing it. That is to be left alone. We tend to mention those things because we want to show our own knowledge on the subject. That doesn't necessarily foster a good relationship, however. If it has been effective, it's better to just leave it be.

Remember, too, that there are different dialects and language choices in different regions of the country. But, as long as the interpretation is understandable, that is perfectly fine. Another thing that I think is so important is to pay attention to your facial expression and body language. This is so critical. When you watch another person's work, you may be analyzing something internally, but your outward appearance may appear as if it reflects criticism. That person who is working may take on those feelings and begin to worry about all these possible negative thoughts. Be careful. Even though you may just be puzzled or trying to understand something, be conscious of that outward appearance you are giving off and control for it. Even though you may actually be confused or feel as if you are not happy with that person's work, keep in check what those facial expressions are and have them be a reflection of warm, positive thoughts. Because you really don't want it to skew their work.

Clip 4. Giving Feedback, continued

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Now I want to talk about how exactly to conduct giving feedback. In doing so, it's important to be specific. By specific I mean that something like it was an effective interpretation does not have enough information in it. It must include exactly where specific breakdowns occurred or where meaning went astray, or where exactly there was success. For example, if a person interprets from sign to English, I may be thinking that a choice of words did not match the register. I could then say that register was a problem in that work. And that's okay. But it's more helpful to say something such as, "I noticed that the register in that work really varied and that it did not reflect the text itself." It seemed that the person was not managing the requirements of the register. That is more clear and specific. As is a statement that says the register strayed back and forth from casual to formal, but I was not able to determine a reason behind that. That helps the person to analyze better and come to realizations. Another example is to say something like, "Fingerspelling could be more clear." Well, that's an extremely broad statement. Instead, the feedback could be that you noticed all the manual letters created with a closed handshape, such as the E,O and R, were only half formed and not fully closed. That may be the reason why the fingerspelling appeared unclear. You can see that it gives a reason and explanation as to why there might be an area that is a problem, as opposed to something very broad and general. There needs to be specifics in order to have enough information in the feedback. There may be instances where you notice something but not be able to explain why. That's okay as well, but more specifics other than just whether something was effective or not effective is what is helpful. So, your first choice is to try to be as detailed and specific as possible about why there is a problem. If you cannot, then be specific about where there is a problem. If you are not able to do that, then of course the feedback has to be taken to a more vague level. But, the point is to be as specific as possible.

Sometimes it helps to have a form of some kind to work with, such as a checklist or a grid to help you to determine what feedback to give. I'll try to describe an example now of what one might look like. It consists of three columns. The first is for what a person, signer, or speaker intended to say. The middle column is for the interpretation, or what was signed or said.

The final column is for your suggestion for other options. This really helps. Let me give you an example. Suppose the English message is: "Jack was a tall man with a long beard." Perhaps you'll see an interpretation signed as JACK TALL HAVE BEARD. But that has not actually given the information that the beard was long. So, maybe there needs to be an extension in the sign for beard or some kind of classifier or non-manual marker in addition to the sign. That would be your recommendation for adding more specifics to the interpretation in order to fit the meaning. Another example of the use of the chart is the source language in English being "There is no room for that box in my car." You may watch an interpretation where the statement is signed: NO ROOM FOR-THAT IN MY CAR. Perhaps you want to put down as a suggestion CAR MY HAVE SPACE/EMPTY

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FOR BOX, NONE. You could outline the sign for SPACE, because the point in that statement is that it is not room as in the room in a building. There is no four-walled structure of a room within the car. It's about space. That feedback would then be provided about the sign choice fitting the meaning of the source language.

Also, when you work with the other interpreter, it's important to ask that person what they want feedback about before you begin. What particular points of interest do they want to work on? Where do they want to focus? Or is a particular area not important to them? So, it's important before you start to ask them and get a sense of which things they are interested in receiving feedback about. Also, do they want a lot of specifics in their feedback or less? Perhaps they are not ready for a lot of in-depth, detailed, feedback and they'd rather hold off on that until another day. In addition, if I am the person receiving feedback, I need to give the other person ideas and specifics about what I want them to observe. For instance, to please look at register, or my fingerspelling, or my non-manuals, whatever it may be. Maybe I've heard from previous feedback about something and I really want more. I can express the areas in which I want feedback. Anything else in addition to that is up to the other person, of course. But, I can provide a map, of sorts, or a course for that person to be able to give me feedback.

Maybe you've received feedback in previous experiences and you know it is helpful for you to jot those things down and to take notes about it. That's helpful for many reasons. Sometimes you may feel a little emotional and you don't want to react in an emotional way, and by jotting those things down your attention is focused on that task as opposed to reacting. Or, maybe you are actually feeling fine, but you are afraid you will forget the feedback. Writing it down, then, helps you to remember. It also makes a great resource for your journal, because you can look back later and realize that while something was a real problem in your work earlier, it isn't any longer. That's a really good feeling to see your own growth. Plus, sometimes it helps with the other person receiving feedback telling me how they are feeling about the process. Hearing that helps me to improve my skills in giving feedback. There's an exchange. In that mutual exchange we can understand how best to give that feedback to each other.

Let's suppose you have an opportunity to get feedback and you want to know how to make the most out of it. Write things down. Use it right away. When you learn something from feedback, implement it into your own work and try to us it right away. By using it quickly, it is much more apt to stay with you long term. Writing and thinking is one thing, but to actually do it is what will help cement it in your memory. Sometimes, it helps if I repeat back what it is I think I've heard to the person who is giving me feedback. This helps me know whether or not I have actually understood it. Not only does it help me remember it, but it ensures that I've understood it correctly. Actually writing it or speaking it in my own words and receiving conformation from that person helps me to realize that I've understood it

in the same way that they recognized it. Another way to really make the most out of the feedback is to have a plan of how to apply it in your work. For instance, planning to use a particular piece of feedback in order to improve and recognizing that a job may be to difficult to implement it in. I promise myself that with this other job that is easier I will work on that one specific area in that job. I remember as a personal experience when I was in college, my fingerspelling was a mess. It wasn't clear; it was too fast; it was sloppy. So, for two years I practiced fingerspelling while walking back and forth between classes. I had interpreted a class and would remember a word that had come up that I had needed to fingerspell. I would walk and practice fingerspelling it over and over again, getting it more clear. For two years. After two years, my fingerspelling had improved dramatically. It was a slow two years and a long process, but in retrospect now I feel that I've been reaping the rewards for thirty years from that two-year investment. The point of all that is to make an action plan of how you will use that feedback in improving your work.

Let's say a person is not very skilled in giving feedback. They may be out of their depth in using positive words. They may not have learned everything we've discussed today. AS a result, they may just throw the feedback at you. And you feel as if you've been dumped on with all of this information. Right it down. And then in your head, you translate those statements into a more positive way of saying it. You can be your own interpreter, so to speak. Then you won't feel as if you've been slammed with all of it and become defensive as a result. You can take the information and determine what that person meant, and then change it to a more positive mode of feedback. This is what you will internalize, thereby making the feedback useful. It's really difficult to achieve the right balance when giving feedback. Sometimes I just have to be myself where I don't have to change it to meet each and every person's individual preference.

But at the same time, I don't want to be stubborn either where I might have no hope. It's a difficult balance between accepting every bit of feedback a person gives and the idea that they are always right and keeping my own sense of myself without being stubborn and giving up hope. Not to be intractable and say that I am who I am either, but to understand that we are ourselves in addition to the feedback we receive. Along the same lines, I need to be open to receiving feedback, but at the same time not be overwhelmed with everything. I must be flexible, but not let everything and anything affect me. I must be direct and clear, but not harsh and mean. I must believe in myself and be strong, but at the same time not be arrogant and egotistical. I must take care of myself, but not think only of myself. While I consider the needs of others, I also take care of myself. You know, these days there is a lot of talk about co-dependence. We need to consider that as well. We need to not be co-dependent, worrying about other people all the time. At the same time, I do need to be sensitive about other people. The point of all of these statements and all of this thinking is balance. Achieving balance is extremely important for feedback and self-growth. In order

for that to happen there must be balance.

To sum up, feedback is such an important part of our growth, both personally and professionally. It is critical. Both people involved benefit and grow, regardless of whether it is in receiving or giving feedback. Both individuals grow from that experience. It's important that if I give feedback or receive it, I am careful and clear and do it well. Then each person will be able to grow that much more easily. You'll grow regardless, but it is easier to do so if I have practiced and made it a habit to be careful and considerate. Plus, I feel that giving and receiving feedback is an important responsibility. It can be used well and should not be wasted. Use it well. I feel that the topic or whole idea of feedback seems simple, but it has it's own complexity and depth. The point of all of it is to be aware. To be aware of the influence and affect you have on other people, as well as being aware of your own goals, motives and affect in other ways. If we work to improve our ability to give and receive feedback, I feel that the work itself will significantly improve. In addition, we can improve in specific areas, whereas before we may not have been clear. We can achieve focus in that area and then work on it. Again, the idea is that we don't have to bite off more than we can chew. In the larger scope of things, we can zero in to different pieces that we want to work on, moving on to others as we go along. Maybe you'll practice fingerspelling for two years and after two years you will reap the rewards of that investment. Maybe you only need to work on it for two hours and that would be sufficient. It all depends on the individual. And that means the amount of time that will be required to improve will vary. But, the potential and the possibility for improvement is the same for all of us. We all have opportunities for improvement.

I hope that has helped and that we can all put this into practice in our field, improving how we talk about our work. If we all use it, it will eventually spread so that we all become team members in giving and receiving feedback. I think it will help not only our field, but us as individuals as well. Thank you.