Give the gift of feedback

I was a member of Toastmasters for several years. There were various roles to play at each meeting, and one of my favorites was the role of Evaluator. Sometimes I had to evaluate a certain speech; other times I was evaluating the entire meeting.

I learned a lot from this role. I learned how to be on the lookout for all the positives and strengths. I learned how to identify areas of opportunity and share them without sugarcoating them but also without making the other person feel poorly. I learned how to share feedback as a suggestion to consider rather than a "here's the right way to do it" approach. I learned how to speak directly to one person while still including the rest of the room in the conversation.

In business I learned to praise in public and criticize in private. If you are talking with someone who embarrasses easily, you might want to praise in private too. But the key takeaway is there is rarely the need to criticize in public. In person, you may find it helpful to ask, "May I share some feedback?" and then wait for the response. Or let the other person know, "I'm going to share some feedback which I hope will be helpful to you in the future." Or even, "I'm going to share some feedback which will help you understand how to keep yourself out of trouble."

I also learned to give positive feedback immediately to reinforce the behavior and negative feedback before the person can make the same mistake again. Sometimes we are tempted to get a criticism out right away, but we need to be considerate of the recipient and adapt to their timing. Telling someone they messed up their opening soliloquy at intermission is not useful and could throw off the rest of their performance. Rather, after the performance is over, let them know so they can practice that section a few more times before the next show.

Originally I titled this post "Give feedback" but changed it because I wanted to make an important distinction that it's really about giving helpful feedback. Feedback the person will value (at least eventually). Feedback the person can do something about. Feedback that will help the person improve and not just make you feel better. It's not about ranting or venting or criticizing and then calling it feedback. In fact, when I looked up the word "feedback" the definition includes the phrase "used as a basis for improvement."

Give the gift of feedback.