How to Give Feedback to Direct Reports Older Than You

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Why this feels harder than ordinary feedback

Giving feedback is uncomfortable for most leaders under any circumstances. When the recipient is considerably older, or has significantly more experience or tenure, an additional layer of discomfort often appears: a worry that the feedback will be read as presumptuous, or that the leader lacks the standing to offer it. This discomfort is understandable, and it also tends to lead to softer, less clear feedback than the situation actually needs, which serves no one well.

Separating the discomfort from the legitimacy

It helps to be clear, internally, that giving feedback is a legitimate part of the role, regardless of the age or experience gap. The feedback is about specific behaviour and its impact on outcomes, not a judgement of someone's overall worth or experience. Holding this distinction clearly reduces the sense that offering feedback is somehow overstepping.

A structure that works well in this specific dynamic

Lead with respect for their experience, genuinely, not as a softening tactic. Acknowledging real expertise before raising a specific concern, "you have deep experience in this area, which is part of why I wanted to raise this directly with you," tends to be received far better than feedback that arrives without this context.

Use a structure built on specific observation, not general characterisation. The Situation-Behavior-Impact model, developed by the Center for Creative Leadership, is particularly useful here: describe the specific situation, the observable behaviour, and its concrete impact, rather than a broader judgement such as "you seem resistant to change," which is far more likely to trigger defensiveness regardless of the recipient's age.

Invite their perspective genuinely, and mean it. Asking "how do you see this situation?" before offering your own full view, particularly with someone who may have context you lack, often surfaces information that changes or refines the feedback itself, and signals that this is a conversation, not a directive from above.

Avoid over-apologising for giving the feedback. A pattern worth watching for is excessive hedging, "I know you have way more experience than me, so feel free to ignore this, but...", which undermines the feedback before it is even delivered. Respect and clarity are not mutually exclusive; the goal is both at once.

Framing that tends to land well

Kim Scott's Radical Candor framework, discussed further in a companion article on new-manager qualities, is directly applicable here: caring personally about the person, shown through genuine

respect for their experience, combined with challenging directly, clearly naming the specific issue, rather than letting discomfort push the conversation toward vague or avoided feedback.

The cost of avoiding this feedback

Leaders who consistently soften or avoid feedback for older direct reports, out of discomfort with the age dynamic, often end up managing that person less effectively than the rest of their team, which both the individual and the wider team tend to notice over time. Clear, respectful feedback, delivered consistently regardless of age, is ultimately a form of genuine respect, treating the person as someone capable of hearing and acting on honest input.