VMBARS MEDICINE FIELD GUIDE

Feedback Without Defensiveness

A field guide for hearing the signal, evaluating it honestly, protecting appropriate boundaries, and turning useful feedback into changed behavior.

PURPOSE

Feedback can threaten identity, arrive through hierarchy, mix observation with interpretation, or be delivered badly. The goal is neither automatic agreement nor reflexive rejection. It is to understand what is being claimed, evaluate it against evidence and standards, decide what action is appropriate, and close the loop.

The receiving loop

1. Regulate	2. Clarify	3. Evaluate	4. Act	5. Close
Create enough space to hear the message.	Identify the observation, standard, impact, and request.	Test the feedback against evidence, context, and other perspectives.	Choose one specific behavior, question, or escalation.	Show what changed and seek evidence of improvement.

Use it when feedback comes from:

- faculty, supervisors, residents, research collaborators, mentors, or peers;
- patients, caregivers, staff, teammates, exam results, or observed outcomes;
- formal evaluations, informal corrections, difficult conversations, and your own error review.

CORE PRINCIPLE

Do not dilute a valid critique. Make it easier to hear, understand, test, and act on. At the same time, adaptation is not obedience: safety, dignity, consent, law, professional standards, and institutional policy take precedence.

1. Notice what defensiveness is protecting

Defensiveness is often a protective response, not proof that the feedback is wrong. Naming the threat can keep the emotion from making the decision.

Possible trigger	What it sounds like internally	More useful question
Truth	That is inaccurate, exaggerated, or unfair.	What exactly is being claimed? Which part is observable, and which part is interpretation?
Relationship	Why should I accept this from this person, in this tone, or in this setting?	Can I separate the message from the delivery long enough to examine both?
Identity	If this is true, maybe I am not competent, respected, or suited for this.	What behavior is under review? What does this single episode establish - and not establish - about me?
Control	I was not given the context, resources, or authority needed to succeed.	Which constraints matter, and what was still within my control?
Safety or dignity	This feels biased, humiliating, retaliatory, discriminatory, or unsafe.	What immediate boundary, documentation, support, or formal channel is appropriate?

The first 60 seconds

Move	Possible language
Pause	I want to understand this. Give me a moment to think.
Reflect	I hear that the main concern is _____. Is that right?
Clarify	Can you point to a specific moment or example?
Bound the response	I may need to review this before responding fully. What would be most helpful to address first?
Commit to follow-up	I will review this and come back by _____ with what I plan to change or clarify.

DO NOT PERFORM INSTANT AGREEMENT

A calm response is not the same as consent. You may need time, evidence, another perspective, or guidance from a trusted supervisor before deciding what the feedback means.

2. Turn the message into something testable

Feedback becomes usable when you can identify the observation, the standard, why the gap matters, and the requested change. If one element is missing, ask.

Element	Question	Example
Observation	What did the person directly see, hear, review, or measure?	The update did not identify who owned the next step.
Interpretation	What meaning are they assigning to the observation?	The team may not know who should act.
Standard	Compared with what expectation, protocol, rubric, or goal?	Each action item should have one owner and due date.
Impact	Why does the gap matter for learning, safety, quality, trust, time, or teamwork?	The ambiguity could delay the work or cause duplicate effort.
Request	What should be repeated, stopped, changed, practiced, or escalated?	End the next update with owner, action, and deadline.
Priority	Must this change now, should it be considered, is it preference, or is it an experiment?	Must fix before the next handoff.

Clarifying prompts

- What is one specific example?
- What would stronger performance have looked or sounded like?
- Which part should I repeat, stop, or change next time?
- How urgent is this, and what should I address first?
- What evidence would show you that I improved?

VAGUE LABELS ARE NOT INSTRUCTIONS

'Be more confident,' 'show more ownership,' or 'improve professionalism' may point to a real concern, but they do not yet tell you what behavior to change. Ask for the observable behavior and the relevant standard.

3. Evaluate the signal without rationalizing it away

The delivery may be poor and the content may still contain a useful signal. The relationship may be strong and the feedback may still be mistaken. Evaluate both separately.

Test	Question
Specificity	Is the feedback tied to an observable episode, work product, behavior, result, or pattern?
Standard	Is there a relevant rubric, protocol, policy, learning objective, role expectation, or safety requirement?
Expertise and vantage point	What could this person reasonably observe and evaluate? What could they not see?
Pattern	Have I heard this from independent sources or seen it in repeated outcomes?
Context	Which constraints, incentives, cultural norms, or situational factors may affect the judgment?
Bias	Could similarity, identity, stereotype, access, hierarchy, or uneven opportunity be shaping the feedback?
Consequence	What is the cost of ignoring valid feedback? What is the cost of applying invalid feedback?
Testability	What small, safe change could generate better evidence?

The opposing-case check

Case for the feedback	Case against or alternative explanation
What evidence suggests the feedback identifies a real gap? What would I advise a peer in the same situation?	What evidence is missing, contradictory, outside the provider's view, or explained by another mechanism?

AIM FOR CALIBRATION, NOT ACQUITTAL

The question is not 'Can I explain why this happened?' It is 'What does the best available evidence suggest, and what response protects learning, performance, safety, and dignity?'

4. Ask for feedback you can use

General requests often produce reassurance or vague judgment. Give the observer a target, a recent performance, and a question that leads to action.

Instead of	Ask
Do you have any feedback?	What is one thing I should repeat and one thing I should change next time?
How did I do?	Where did my reasoning, communication, or execution become difficult to follow?
Was that right?	Which information or cue should have changed my approach?
What should I study?	Which gap is most likely to recur, and how would you test whether I fixed it?
Am I improving?	Compared with the last attempt, what changed? What is the next highest-priority behavior?
Why did I get this rating?	Which observed behaviors and standards drove this rating?

Make the request easier to answer

- Ask near enough to the performance that the observer can recall specifics.
- Name the capability you are trying to improve.
- Request one or two priorities rather than an exhaustive critique.
- Invite correction of your self-assessment: 'My read is _____. What am I missing?'
- When appropriate, ask patients, caregivers, staff, peers, and collaborators about what they directly experienced.

FEEDBACK IS RELATIONAL

People are more likely to invest in specific feedback when they understand your goal, have observed the relevant work, believe you will use the information, and see that the conversation is connected to your development rather than a performance ritual.

5. Choose the response pathway

Not all feedback deserves the same response. Classify it before acting.

Feedback type	Response
Clear, valid, and urgent	Acknowledge it, correct the immediate issue, seek supervision when needed, and document the learning action.
Clear and valid, not urgent	Choose a specific practice, schedule the next test, and close the loop with the provider.
Plausible but incomplete	Ask for an example, standard, context, or evidence; compare with another informed source.
Conflicting	Identify whether the disagreement reflects different goals, settings, methods, standards, or preferences; seek the decision owner.
Preference or style	Decide whether adaptation improves the work, supports the relationship, or imposes a meaningful cost. Label it as preference rather than universal truth.
Outside the provider's vantage point	Consider the signal, state the missing context, and seek review from someone positioned to evaluate the issue.
Biased, humiliating, retaliatory, unsafe, or professionally inappropriate	Protect immediate safety, document facts, seek confidential support, and use the appropriate institutional or reporting channel.

Language for disagreement

- I understand the concern as _____. I see one part differently because _____. Can we review the standard and the example together?
- I received different guidance in another setting. Who should resolve the expectation for this context?
- I want to learn from this. I also want to separate the performance issue from the way the feedback was delivered.

HIERARCHY CHANGES THE RISK

A trainee may reasonably need advice before challenging, documenting, or escalating feedback from someone with evaluative authority. Use trusted faculty, ombuds, learner-affairs, compliance, or other established channels appropriate to the situation. Do not manage a safety concern alone.

6. Convert feedback into one changed behavior

Agreement is not evidence of learning. The loop closes when feedback changes a future action and the result is reviewed.

Step	Record
Signal	The feedback, result, or observed outcome in neutral language.
My understanding	The behavior, standard, impact, and priority as I currently understand them.
Evidence check	Examples, rubric or protocol, self-review, other perspectives, and unresolved uncertainty.
Changed behavior	One visible action to repeat, stop, change, ask, practice, or escalate.
Test	The next setting, date, observer, and evidence that could show improvement.
Close the loop	What I will report back, to whom, and when.

Feedback-to-action ledger

Feedback / source	Priority	Next behavior	Test / observer	Result / follow-up

Close-loop language

- You pointed out _____. I changed _____. In the next attempt, _____ happened. What should I refine now?
- I tested the recommendation in _____. It helped with _____ but created _____. How should I adapt it for this context?

VISIBLE APPLICATION BUILDS TRUST

People can see that their teaching mattered when you apply feedback, acknowledge the help, and return with evidence. That makes future feedback more specific and turns isolated comments into a developmental relationship.

7. Give feedback that can be received

Receiving feedback well does not require tolerating poor feedback. When you give it, preserve the critique while reducing avoidable ambiguity and threat.

Move	What to do
Positive frame	Clarify the shared goal, the role of the conversation, and your intent to improve the work or support development.
Observation	Describe what you directly saw, heard, reviewed, or measured. Separate fact from interpretation.
Why it matters	Connect the observation to safety, quality, trust, learning, teamwork, time, or the stated objective.
Recommendation	Offer a specific next behavior, example, resource, practice, or question.
Priority	Label the comment: Must fix, Should consider, Taste or preference, or Experiment.
Dialogue	Check the receiver's understanding, context, and view. Agree on the next test and follow-up.

Calibrated language

When you know	When you infer	When taste is involved
The rubric requires _____. The submission currently _____.	My read is _____. I think this may be happening because _____.	This is a preference, not a requirement. If the goal is _____, I would try _____.

Before giving feedback

- Am I positioned to evaluate this behavior or artifact?
- Is now the right time and setting, especially when dignity, privacy, or patient care is involved?
- What are the one or two comments most likely to improve the next attempt?
- Am I criticizing the work or behavior rather than assigning a character verdict?

CANDOR AND CARE ARE PARTNERS

Do not hide a consequential concern inside praise or a long list of minor notes. State the priority clearly, explain why it matters, and give the receiver a fair path to understand and act.

One-page feedback record

Date / setting: _____ Feedback source / role: _____

What I heard	What I need to clarify
Observation / interpretation / standard / impact / request / priority	Specific example / stronger performance / evidence / urgency / expected follow-up
My initial response	My evaluation
Emotion or trigger / what I wanted to defend / what remains hard to hear	Specificity / standard / vantage point / pattern / context / bias / consequence / testability

Response pathway	Changed behavior and test
Act now / schedule / clarify / triangulate / resolve conflict / decline / document / seek support / escalate	Behavior / setting / date / observer / evidence / follow-up

Close the loop

What changed: _____

Evidence and remaining question: _____

Who needs an update and by when: _____

SAFETY CHECK

Does this record contain protected health information, confidential evaluation content, identifying details, or material that belongs only in an approved institutional system? Store or discuss it only through authorized channels.

Further reading and scope

Use this guide to interpret feedback and choose an appropriate response. It is a peer learning resource, not a substitute for supervision, formal evaluation policy, learner-support services, or reporting procedures.

Selected sources

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen. Thanks for the Feedback.

Telio S, Ajjawi R, Regehr G. The educational alliance as a framework for reconceptualizing feedback in medical education. Academic Medicine. 2015.

Mohamed Noor MN, et al. Developing a framework for medical student feedback literacy using a triangulated thematic analysis. 2025.

Related VMBARS resources

- Candid Feedback That Lands.
- The Hidden Curriculum of Medicine.
- The Medical Trainee Learning Loop.

Use the guide with judgment

- Clinical urgency may require immediate correction; follow the supervisor and local safety process.
- An assessment dispute, mistreatment concern, disability or accommodation issue, discrimination concern, or retaliation risk may require confidential institutional guidance.
- Do not diagnose another person's motives from one interaction. Document observable facts and seek the appropriate perspective.

THE STANDARD

Feedback is useful when it improves your model, changes an appropriate behavior, strengthens safety or contribution, and remains open to correction. Good receiving is not passive. It is disciplined interpretation followed by accountable action.

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