Why I Hate the Feedback Sandwich and What to do About It

I'm going to take a big bite out of the "feedback sandwich." Mmmm.

If you're not familiar with the "feedback sandwich," it's a method popularized by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson in the book, _The One Minute Manager_. It basically goes like this"

Praise first, then correct, then praise again.

And I hate it.

Here's what the "feedback sandwich" often sounds like:

Leader: "I need to correct a behavior or point out something wrong that someone is doing. What should I do? I know..."

Five minutes later...

Leader: "Jim, you are a valuable member of our organization and are doing a bang up job with the new sales reports."

Jim, thinking to himself and possibly audibly: "But?"

Leader: "What I really need you to work on, though, is your [insert real reason for the meeting, a criticism or correction here]."

Jim: "Uh, sure. I can work on that."

Leader: "Great. Thanks. And your hair looks phenomenal today. What _are_ you using in it?"

OK, that last one probably never happens. Right? Or are leaders supposed to compliment their team members on their hair? Just making sure I didn't miss something.

A lot of people swear by the "feedback sandwich." People a lot more famous than I am. People I look up to. And don't get me wrong, _The One Minute Manager_ is a phenomenal book.

But the "feedback sandwich" has one major flaw, the reason why I hate it so much and eschewed it four years ago.

It differentiates positive feedback from corrective feedback.

It comes down to this...the fundamental problem with the feedback sandwich:

It's used by humans.

Human leaders with emotions. Human leaders with expressive faces. Human leaders who telegraph the true intention of the meeting or feedback from a mile away.

And human recipients on the other end who also have emotions and can tell the leader's true intentions from a mile away. People know when they are being called to the principal's office.

Thus...the beginning and the end parts are rarely heard. They are fluff. They are ignored.

Or the middle part is missed. The real reason for the meeting is missed. The very thing that a team member needs to work on the most is overlooked. The opportunity for growth is passed up.

Summary of feedback sandwich flaws

1. Humans have emotions.
2. Mixing positive and corrective feedback is confusing.
3. Important feedback is missed.

A better way...no bread, just meat

About four years ago I started using a simple method of giving positive and corrective (notice I didn't say "negative") feedback in the exact same manner. And I told my team what it would look like in advance.

The wrong way (to me at least) was what I did prior to that. Good feedback was delivered with a huge smile and a pat on the back. A big "attaboy" if you will.

Corrective feedback was preceded by an invitation to visit the principal's office and then a long drawn out, beat around the bush, finally get to the point extravaganza.

So I told my team that from now on it would like look like this:

Positive: "When you do X, here is what happens. Keep it up!"

Corrective: "When you do X, here is what happens. What can you do to change that?"

The format is exactly the same for each of them. Neither was delivered with extreme variance in emotion.

Listen to the audio version for more examples of my feedback method and further insight into this topic.

Why is this feedback method better?

1. **Because we're all adults here.** And I made sure my team was all wearing their big boy (and girl) pants before I introduced it to them.
2. **I spent a lot of time giving positive feedback.** I practiced the 90/10 rule.. For every one critique or correction, I gave nine positive pieces of feedback. In other words, I spent a lot of time giving positive feedback. I didn't need to muddle the corrective feedback with fluff.
3. **They knew I meant it.** Whether it was positive or corrective feedback, my team knew I meant it. When I took out the fluff, they knew it was real. Corrective feedback was acted upon and positive feedback made sure they did more of the same.

Feedback is intended for one reason: to cause the desired future behavior, by either reinforcing a good one or correcting a bad one.

It's best to keep it simple.

What are your views of the feedback sandwich, positive or negative? What better ways have you used?