

TLP Five-Minute Read Over Coffee – Giving a progress update

I have delivered 100s of workshops over the last 10 years on giving a precise and meaningful update at work. I have worked with many clients who feel they have said too much or conversely too little, they have not done justice to their own performance or not clearly communicated the issues being faced.

The points of advice below focus on both language and professional practice.

1) Open or closed. Do you want your manager, project team, meeting participants to give feedback or just listen? Consider the difference below:

Example: The number of complaints has increased, and I would welcome suggestions on what we can do about this. (Open style)

Example: The number of complaints increased over the previous quarter. All complaints were quickly followed up on within one working day. (Closed style)

2) Don't ramble. We all have a tendency to talk too much when anxious. Less is often more!

3) Don't be afraid to use bold adjectives, but make sure you can back it up with substance.

Example: It has been an excellent quarter. Turnover has increased by 9% and delivery times have been reduced by an average of two weeks, despite the ongoing supply chain crisis.

4) Powerfully say you don't know. You are asked a complex question in your team meeting. The tendency might be to 'fumble' (*unconvincingly give*) a half answer. An alternative is to confidently say you don't know.

Example: I don't know the answer, but I will get back to you on that straight away.

Example: That is a good question, I need to check the data and will email the team later today.

5) Don't be too cold and mechanical. Don't overuse the passive voice when giving updates. If overdone, you can give the impression of being a little robotic. A mix often works.

Example: The network has been upgraded and new versions of windows xxx have been installed (*passive voice - process focused and efficient*). The IT Team have done a great job on managing this upgrade with a minimum of disruption. (*Active voice and warm*)

6) Don't mix up 'challenging' with 'qualifying' a point. There is lots of confusion in the use of 'however' and 'but', on the one hand, and 'even though', 'although', 'despite' and 'in spite of', on the other hand. In general, 'however' is often overused by non-native speakers.

Example: That is an interesting point, however, I don't think we have the resources to implement it. (However, directly challenges the point before.)

Example: Although we have faced a number of issues with the launch, I am really confident we will hit our sales target for Q1. ('Although', qualifies but does not challenge the achievement of the target.)

7) Really listen. It can feel cliched to highlight the importance of listening in a progress meeting, but it really matters, particularly in virtual meetings where interruptions can be more frequent. Giving space and oxygen to other participants is a critical success factor in any meeting.

8) Get your voice heard - assertively but not aggressively. When English is not your first language, it can feel easy to 'stay in your shell' and not contribute. This can often cause a sense of frustration. There are ways of contributing that can be clear and polite at the same time.

Example: I would like to suggest, I would recommend... Could I take forward a.... ('Would' and 'could' are useful here.)

Example: We need to think carefully about, we should consider the risks of... (The use of 'we' can soften a difficult message.)

I hope this has been helpful and please contact me, toby@tlp.lu, with any reflections or questions on this.
