

Constructive Feedback and Belonging

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As the idiom goes, “Pobody’s nerfect.” We all benefit from feedback, now and then. It’s part of what helps us identify opportunities to grow as individuals and better support our communities. The way we exchange feedback can have a major impact on our sense of belonging.

Belonging (the “B” in DEIB), in this context, goes beyond simply including a diverse representation of people; it’s taking care to help people feel safe and connected within our community. Belonging is what makes vulnerability possible, and we can’t have the courage or strength to grow without vulnerability. Belonging begins with empathy and compassion, so before we evaluate the ways in which we share and receive feedback, I would encourage everyone to explore an Empathy Activity prepared by Gigi Coulson, former Interim Society DEI Officer:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HvPuZh5JCLU4qN4VkwZjj4i6VNuOGCnm/view>

As this survey illustrates, far too many of our members have not been made to feel like they belong, and feedback has sometimes been unkind, unwelcoming, and full of microaggressions, if not outright exclusionary and offensive. It’s important that we take this diversity of experience into consideration, when preparing to offer feedback to others. It’s also important that we establish consent to provide that feedback; we can try to lead with and assume positive intent in ourselves and others, but unsolicited advice or criticism may not be helpful or appropriate, and can have serious negative impacts in some situations, so please ask whether someone is open to hearing your input, and respect their boundaries if the answer is no/not yet. Whether we’re brand new to the SCA or have been playing for decades, nobody likes to feel ridiculed or ostracized for their efforts, and gatekeeping behaviors like “garb snarking” are swiftly going out of fashion, so how can we offer genuinely constructive feedback?

You may already be familiar with the THINK acronym, which helps us decide whether feedback is actually needed. Before offering advice or criticism, we can ask ourselves a few questions about the information we want to provide:

T – Is it True?

H – Is it Helpful?

I – Is it Important/Inspiring?

N – Is it Necessary?

K – Is it Kind?

It’s also important to ask ourselves whether we are the right person to offer feedback. When it comes to matters of our organization’s core values and addressing inappropriate behavior, everyone has a role to play in owning that accountability discussion. Clear, direct communication is a form of kindness, when holding ourselves and others accountable. That said, if you are a member of a marginalized group, it should not be solely your job to bear the weight of educating and holding accountable those in positions of power and authority. Lean on allies, when possible, especially if those allies already have a social connection that they can leverage to reach someone who is behaving in a way that creates harm. If you are the person with more power, authority, and privilege, take that imbalance into account when

exchanging feedback with others; your words may carry more weight and influence than you realize, and you may not be aware of the challenges faced by others. Pay special attention to the “K” in THINK.

Another very helpful tool in determining whether, when, and how to offer feedback is The Engaged Feedback Checklist, published by Brené Brown at www.brenebrown.com/daretolead and quoted below:

I know that I’m ready to give feedback when...

- ✓ I’m ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.
- ✓ I’m willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).
- ✓ I’m ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.
- ✓ I’m ready to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes.
- ✓ I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.
- ✓ I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming.
- ✓ I am open to owning my part.
- ✓ I can genuinely thank someone for their efforts rather than criticize them for their failings.
- ✓ I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to growth and opportunity.
- ✓ I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.
- ✓ I am aware of power dynamics, implicit bias, and stereotypes.

When we’re ready to discuss observations and ideas, how we go about having that conversation is crucial to whether we foster a sense of belonging. Ideally, we want to ensure that the discussion is respectfully approached with consent, active listening, and a sense of mutual support, humility, curiosity, courage, empathy, and accountability. If we’re in a place of seeking growth and connection, we can ask for feedback from people we trust, but we don’t have to accept and integrate feedback that is not kind or useful. We can lean into humility and curiosity by explaining what we know and asking for clarification, when we might be missing pieces of understanding. By maintaining healthy boundaries and asking for breaks for contemplation, when needed, we can stay present and collaborate through areas of discomfort and disagreement. Remember, diversity is strength in a community, including diversity of opinions and perspectives, and we may not always be able to arrive at total agreement on any particular topic. To embrace belonging, we need to demonstrate that it is safe to bring up challenging topics without fear of retaliation or disrespect, to understand that the process of giving and receiving feedback is a vulnerable space, and to handle that process with the kindness and clarity it deserves.