

## Getting the Most from Sounding Board

Sounding Board is when two (or more) people get together and one of them talks about his or her plans and seeks feedback on them. It could also be used to talk about a decision that needs to be made. It doesn't have to be done at the meeting.

### *Why Use Sounding Board?*

- You might be missing an essential ingredient and not realize it.
- It's motivating if someone likes your plan. Also, talking about your plan will usually increase your enthusiasm and help you clarify the plan.
- If your idea or plan is severely flawed, your best chance of fixing it is early on. You will save a lot of money, time and heartache if you get good feedback at the start.
- If your idea or plan is fatally-flawed, it's best to find out early and not waste weeks, months or even *years*.
- You can save a lot of time and/or money if the person playing the role of consultant knows a shortcut or resource that helps you toward your goal.

It improves the quality of the meeting if the requester:

1. Is sincerely open to feedback.
2. Chooses a consultant who is likely to be frank.
3. Chooses a consultant who's not like them—who thinks differently. Or else, chooses someone who understands the profession or background of the individual(s) that the requester must deal with.
4. Does as much thinking as possible ahead of time, by writing as much of a plan as he or she can.
5. (In some cases) sends the written plan in advance.
6. Thinks through their plans and situation ahead of time, making a list of questions for the consultant.
7. Either does not reveal confidential information (for example a new business idea) or is sure that their consultant is trustworthy.

8. Doesn't take the consultant's disagreement as the kiss of death, but instead asks *why* they disagree.
9. Considers getting a second opinion.
10. If stuck, tries to become clear on the particular stage: assessing the situation, envisioning a goal or preferred state, or planning and taking action. (See *the Many-One-New Model*.)

It helps the quality of the interaction if the consultant:

1. First asks if the requester wants a brief gut reaction or an in-depth assessment. A gut reaction might require only five minutes.
2. Asks what kind of feedback the requester wants if the requester hasn't been specific. (See the section *How to Give Feedback* below.)
3. Doesn't believe there's one right answer, but instead helps the requester brainstorm over many ideas.
4. Is encouraging and positive but is candid if some of the requester's plans seem inadequate or unbelievable. In these cases, build on the parts that are reasonable.
5. Uses the skill of Empathy by actively reflecting the core message of what they're hearing to make sure they understand.
6. Asks questions to make the requester do some active thinking.
7. Pays attention to the requester's body language and tone of voice for signs that they are becoming defensive or overwhelmed by the feedback. If this begins to happen, it might be best to pause or postpone until they can digest the criticism.
8. Gently challenges the requester if the requester seems to be closed to feedback or a suggestion without a good reason.
9. Identifies the step that the requester is at (assessment, goal-setting or planning) and helps them move to the next step.
10. Can listen actively and empathize during the process.
11. Does not judge the person if the plan is poorly developed, but keeps the focus of judgment on the plan and on practical next-steps.
12. Asks the requester along the way, and at the end if the feedback given so far is useful.

## *How to Give Feedback and Constructive Criticism*

- Don't give feedback to people unless they request it or are willing to accept it. You are not their teacher unless they agree to be taught by you.
- If you don't like the person or are in a bad mood, decline to give feedback since you probably can't do it objectively.
- When giving feedback, it helps to start and end with something positive, something that you liked or appreciated. Be specific by telling them exactly what you liked. Talk about facts and information when you can.
- Give them the kind of feedback they want. Ask whether they want:
  1. Objective feedback, such as, "Your goals are not clear since you don't say how much time you will spend and how much you plan to save." or "When I faced a similar situation, I ..."
  2. Subjective feedback, such as, "In my opinion, you aren't giving yourself near enough time to reach your goal." or "I believe that your plan will work."
  3. Half subjective-half objective, such as, "Regarding your pitch for finding help, I found myself daydreaming and looking at my watch." (These things objectively happened, but maybe the person next to you found the presentation enthralling and perfect for their needs.)
  4. Suggestions for improvements.
  5. Or some combination of the previous four.

Some sentence formulas for giving verbal feedback:

1. "I liked when you (objective fact or their action) because I (personal reaction or emotion)."
2. "I disliked when you (objective fact, behavior or action) because I (personal reaction)."
3. "The thing to improve that would yield the greatest payoff would be \_\_\_\_\_."
4. "Another thing that I liked was \_\_\_\_\_."
5. "My overall impression was \_\_\_\_\_."