Giving And Receiving Feedback

Background:
The usual, unspoken setup for an observer giving feedback to a caller is something like the following:
- The caller is expected to give a flawless performance.
- The observer wants to make the caller's performance better suit the observer's taste.
- The observer therefore notes any imperfections or shortcomings, and brings them to the attention of the caller.
- If the caller had reasons for doing what he/she did, or is simply feeling defensive, the caller may defend himself/herself to the observer.
- The observer may disagree, in which case the process repeats.
- If the caller complains about the feedback, the observer takes that as defensiveness on the part of the caller.

The caller can't win this game, and the observer can't lose. The caller therefore feels defensive, and has a hard time hearing the feedback, let alone learning from it. There is little incentive for the observer to make the feedback useful, and no process at all for the observer to improve the quality of the feedback.

About these notes:
We attempt to reduce the caller's feelings of defensiveness (so that the feedback can sink in), and to improve the usefulness of the observer's feedback (so that the caller can learn from it). We can't control the actual setup and assumptions, but we can constrain the caller and observer to *act as if* the setup were this:
- The caller has asked the observer to note (certain aspects of) the performance.
- The observer is acting like a video camera, not a customer to be satisfied.
- The caller is the one who will decide whether any changes are desired, and in what direction.

Since there are no accusations or complaints being delivered, there is no need for defense or explanation.
Again, in doing this we have two goals:
- Tune the feedback for maximum information and minimum "should" content.
- Alter the setup so that the observer has no power over the caller.

Here are the guidelines:

Good feedback is:
- An observation about your own direct experience. Don't say, "that was good," "you should have made one more set," or "everyone got confused in the B part." Do say, "I enjoyed ____," "when I got to the bottom we were really crowded down there," or "the hey in the B part sometimes broke down in my set."
- Specific. Don't say, "that was good," or "your directions didn't work." Do say, "you got us moving after only eight syllables," or "I was facing down when you said, 'turn right,' but some other second men were facing up."
- Balanced. List equally things you think need changing, things you think are great, and things that are just interesting (like "you did four dances this evening").
- Useful. Don't say, "you're too short," or "I was feeling grumpy tonight." Do say, "I couldn't see you from the back," or "I needed a water break about 15 minutes before we finally took one."

Some tendencies you may need to fight:
- Repeating the feedback until you get the reaction you want. That is self-serving. Give the feedback, don't wish for anything in return, and give the initiative back to the caller.
- Noticing only things that need "fixing," or only things you know how to "fix." You are not the one who will choose what to change and what to keep, and you are not the one who will be making the changes. Give as much information as you can.
- Solving the "problem" for the caller. Let them decide whether it's really a problem, and whether it's worth solving. Even if it is, give the caller credit for being able to solve it. Help if they ask, but only then.
- Telling only what someone wants to hear. It's more useful to give all the information (or, if time is tight, a balanced selection).
- Softening the feedback with phrases like, "since the fan was going, your voice seemed a little soft, though I know you can project when you want to, and ..." Ultimately, that's patronizing, and not as useful as, "I could barely hear you." Keep it crisp.
- Euphemisms, hints or circumlocutions, like "Bruce, it's 9 o'clock!" These are invitations to miscommunication. I saw a great example during a drought, when local restaurants were trying to save water. They wanted not to bring water to the table unless it was wanted. So a note on the table said, "To conserve our natural resources, please ask for a glass of water." Trying not to say "no," to anything, they wound up producing the opposite effect from what they wanted! Be as direct and explicit as you can.

Receiving feedback:
- You get to say what kind of feedback you want, and on what subjects. You can say you don't want any feedback. You can ask your friends to notice details of what you do, or to notice their general feelings about your presentation. You can tell them you're working on, say, your timing, and to ignore other things.
- You get to say, "stop — I've got all I can handle right now."
- Be sure you understand the feedback. Ask questions if necessary: "What effect did it have on you when I did that?" "Can you be more specific?" "Do you remember exactly what I was doing then?" "Was there anything you liked?" "What, exactly?" Remember, though, that your aim is to *understand,* not to agree or disagree.
- When you understand the feedback, give the observer a sincere "Thank you"…
- …and stop there. Change the subject, talk to someone else, or walk away. Resist the temptation to explain, defend yourself, etc. You have both worked hard to make the discussion a one-way transfer of information — keep it that way.