

# [Before offering feedback consider if you’re trying to teach a pig to sing](https://assignbuster.com/before-offering-feedback-consider-if-youre-trying-to-teach-a-pig-to-sing/)

Anybody who has been either end of a bad feedback session knows only too well that the delivery of unwelcome and unwanted feedback seldom ends well. It can be infuriating when you want to provide much wanted feedback and the person who desperately needs it turns a deaf ear to you. Especially so when you’ve asked if they want some feedback, they consent, and then they refuse to listen. Over the years, I have been ambushed enough times by people pretending to have my best interest at heart, only to use my consent as a pretext to hurl insults and venom at me.

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The best way to avoid bad feedback sessions is to mind one’s own business. But sometimes, emotions (or a couple of drinks) get the better of us, and we find ourselves providing feedback that turns out to be intrusive meddling. We start acting like a felt-up prom-date and indignantly tell the stars above that we were only trying to help, wondering plaintively, " Is this is the thanks I get?" In truth, we can avoid our poor-man’s death scene from Camille by asking ourselves some basic questions before leaping into a bad feedback session.

## Do I have the right to provide feedback?

I am so often asked who I am that I literally had business cards up that say, “ Phil La Duke, Obnoxious Stranger.” Among the services offered on the card are “ boring stories, unwelcome advances, unsolicited advice, and over-stayed welcomes.” In addition to being a nice icebreaker, it’s incredibly accurate. The pertinent offering here today is unsolicited advice . Before we have a right to provide feedback, we need to have some standing, such as an employer-employee relationship, a familial tie, afriendship, etc. Otherwise, we are little more than obnoxious know-it-alls who poke our noses into the business of others. So while I might think that the stretch pants worn by the woman in the checkout line in front of me looks like someone trying to squeeze cottage cheese through a plastic bag, as much as I may think she is in desperate need of a fashion intervention, without standing I must keep my opinion to myself.

## Am I offering feedback to help the person?

It may bug the heck out of me that Milo talks too much in meetings, but how will my telling him that he needs to “ shut up in meetings” help him be successful? It doesn’t.

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Moreover, it makes me look like a self-important bully, someone who likes to point out other people’s faults while under the misguided impression he is perfect. Just getting things off my chest may make me feel better, but it's not helpful to others. People loserespectfor me, and when the time comes that I really do need to provide constructive feedback, it’s likely to be dismissed as more venting.

## Does the person respect my opinion?

I used to work for a guy who looked like he dressed in the dark and slept in dumpsters. I honestly expected to find pizza crusts in his lapels. Nonetheless, he would razz me about my choice of colors and styles. I would slowly look him up and down and say, " fashion tips mean so much coming from you.” I respected him as a businessman but a fashionista he was not. Okay, I didn’t really respect him as a businessman, but I’m trying to be nice.

## Have I been hypercritical to the person in the past?

If every time I'm offered feedback I get an earful of “ what's wrong with Phil,” I’m less likely to answer “ yes” the next time you offer your sage feedback. There is only so much criticism a person is willing to tolerate and in the case of me, it’s not much.

## Will the person change behavior based on the feedback?

Sometimes we just can’t resist trying to teach the old dog new tricks, but if we are providing feedback to someone we know most probably won’t change, it’s can be more like trying to teach an old dog a new card trick. Years ago I read an article about a failed government funded program where a scientist tried to teach a pig to sing. The scientist was baffled why no one was able to teach a pig to sing. It seems that a pig is intelligent enough to learn just about anything (except neurosurgery, but my bet is a half-intelligent pig could be taught to drive better than most), and pigs can make a variety of noises that could be used to approximate notes. After years of frustration the scientist conclude his task was pointless. I kept the headline which was a direct quote from the scientist: “ Never try to teach a pig to sing -- you won't succeed and you will only aggravate the pig."

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In too many cases, we aren’t really providing feedback, we’re merely trying to teach a pig to sing.