GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK:
some tips from Beehive Dramaturgy Studio

for generative artists, collaborative teams,
writers groups, and early-career dramaturgs

Please feel free to share these tips --
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GIVING FEEDBACK

Everyone participating in a development process is there to support the generative artists, their process, and their work. Here are some suggestions for how to do that:

1. If you are in a direct conversation with the artist/s, ask: "what would be helpful for you right now?" Their response will guide you so you can ensure your feedback is useful, and the very act of asking this will indicate that you are looking to be supportive.

2. Start with positives. Everyone wants to hear affirmation of their work.

3. You may have a great solution or fix, but it might not be the **right** great solution or fix for this project. Avoid prescriptive feedback.

4. Don't belabor a point after you've made it.

5. Just giving basic information about how you observed the piece – whose story you were tracking, what central themes felt most present, what questions you felt the piece was inviting you to wrestle with – can let the artist/s know whether they are on the right track.

6. Focus on your personal response, and not on rewriting or "solving." Let the creator/s see the piece from your perspective – which is a view they can never have, and one they are likely curious to understand. For example: I really enjoyed _____. I was confused about _____. I was most interested in _____.

Nearly any critique you have that starts with "you could/should/didn't" or "the piece does/doesn't/can" could be flipped around to an "I experienced _____ " statement.

"But wait!" you might say. "I'm a [collaborator on this piece/close friend of someone involved/person with the best idea ever]! Can't *I* give prescriptive feedback?"

If an artist has expressed that they are having trouble with a part of the piece, and you feel you have a valuable suggestion, try asking, "are you open to suggestions about that?"

If you are part of the creative team and have developed a close working relationship with the generative artist(s), you will ideally get to a place where the formality of a critique process evolves into a more organic give and take. The privilege of offering advice is not a badge to earn through years in the industry or sweat equity, but something that can arise through individual relationship-building. Work at it, and proceed with thoughtfulness and care.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Receiving feedback is a part of the process designed to support you, the generative artist, **when you want it**. You should always be in control of what is being discussed, when the discussion happens, how it is framed, and how long it lasts.

Before getting feedback, consider offering parameters for what sort of responses are or aren't helpful at this moment. "I'm mainly interested in hearing about Act II story issues right now." "I know my antagonist's motivations are fuzzy and don't need feedback on that. But what would be helpful is…"

The more you understand about what you are trying to accomplish, or what questions you have about your project, the more helpful the feedback can be.

Questions to ask yourself before receiving feedback*

Does this piece have a central character? If so, who is it? What is their arc?

What do you want the audience to walk away with?

Is it important to you that the majority of the audience understands the story and/or the central idea in a specific way? Is confusion, or debate, or even frustration, an acceptable response, or something you want to avoid?

What sort of external feedback could be useful to hear right now? What might be less useful, or actively unhelpful?

* *knowing that you don't know the answers to any of these questions is helpful, too. Articulating your position to yourself is the important part.*

Talking to general audiences at workshops/readings

Theatergoers who share feedback after developmental presentations of your work may not always be able to pinpoint exactly why they responded to your show in the way they did, or understand the etiquette around talking to artists, but as audience members their impressions are valuable, and worthy of respect and consideration.

Their feedback can tend toward either extreme – highly prescriptive ("you should try having your two lead characters fall in love") or so supportive and positive it doesn't tell you much. Try asking questions that focus on their personal responses – which characters or moments most interested them, where they were confused or bored, what they were left thinking about.

If there are aspects of the piece you're concerned about, find a way to ask about them that doesn't telegraph your desired response. General audience feedback tends to be most helpful when not colored by much knowledge about your intent.

Talking to other theater artists
Given their familiarity with the artistic process, it can be more helpful to talk with other theatermakers about your impetus/intent for the piece – seeing where you are headed can keep everyone focused on supporting your goals, in absence of which it can be easy for people to slip into thinking about the piece they would make.

Even when talking to other artists who are part of your creative team, feel free to create boundaries about the feedback you are interested in and to announce when you have reached saturation.

Listening for subtext – what's the comment beneath the comment?
It can be worthwhile to trust that everyone who engages with your show has a valuable perspective on it, and to assume that you will have to do some detective work to find the value contained in their articulation of that perspective.

Prescriptive feedback often misses the mark, but the feeling that inspired it is worth sussing out. Put another way: you are looking for the audience's 'symptoms,' not their 'diagnoses,' even though they will often give you the latter.

i.e., "It's too long" is an audience member's **diagnosis** (that length/running time is an issue) of their **symptom** (losing interest at some point). They could be right about the diagnosis. Or, maybe the length is right, but there is some other reason they were feeling bored/antsy (which they may or may not be able to pinpoint). When you understand the issue, you can address it in a way you choose, which may have nothing to do making cuts.

One final thought, on honoring your vision
Others can tell you things about your show that you didn't realize are there -- a central idea or question or theme that you hadn't been conscious of threading into the piece, but which you put there nonetheless. Others cannot tell you what your piece *should* be about, or what your central theme or idea should be (although they will try if you ask them!). The best show you can create will be closely tied to *your* unique vision and passion.