

Giving Feedback as a Coach

Introduction

Coaches may have to give feedback on a number of occasions, and will have to deliver both praise and criticism. Sometimes, they may view the encounter with some trepidation. There is no need to be apprehensive about it however, as much can be done beforehand to ensure that the risks of the feedback session going wrong are minimised and the desired outcomes are achieved.

Like all interviews, good communications skills are important to giving feedback successfully. Communication can be defined as 'the process of transferring ideas or thoughts from one person to another, for the purpose of creating understanding in the person receiving the communication.' Two key skills of feedback, therefore, are questioning and listening.

This checklist focuses on the overall skill of giving feedback. A separate Checklist focuses on the often more challenging aspect of giving criticism. (See Related Checklists).

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

B: Providing direction, unit 6

D: Working with people, units 1, 2, 6

Definition

Feedback is a term adopted from the engineering sciences in which the output of a system is used to regulate or control the input to the system. In the context of coaching people, the feedback process is that of giving others information about their activities, skills and abilities. The information provided will enable the coachee to decide, firstly, whether their behaviour has had the effect it was intended to have, and secondly, if not, how it should be changed to have the desired effect.

Action checklist

1. Prepare for the feedback session

Preparation for any feedback encounter is crucial. You need to think about the outcomes you want, *what* you are going to say and *how* you are going to say it. You need to consider *where* you are going to give the feedback and ensure you have allowed yourself sufficient time. You shouldn't rush it.

Your objectives should be as follows: -

- Ownership of the feedback by the recipient
- A commitment to change where desired
- Some contracting of an action plan for implementation after the feedback session.

The feedback interview should be a participative exercise where everything that is said will be viewed as helpful and developmental. This means that the feedback should be carried out in a relaxed atmosphere, unhurried, free from tension and characterised by openness and honesty. Statements that are judgmental, accusing and patronising will immediately encounter resistance and a range of defensive behaviours with the result that the objectives of the interview are unlikely to be achieved. Side by side, alongside a table, or across the corner of a table is often a good setting, especially when a visual portrayal is needed. A private and confidential setting is vital.

2. Focus on communication skills

Any communication must involve a minimum of two people – the sender and the receiver. As the person giving the feedback, you should remember that while you should aim to be talking for only about 20% of the time, you are communicating as both the sender *and* receiver so you need to consider the communication process from both perspectives.

As the initial sender (or giver) of feedback, try to avoid misunderstandings by:-

a) Working at sending clear, unambiguous messages.

Think about your use of words and the logic of the message, whether it is pitched at the appropriate level, your questioning technique and your body language.

b) Checking that the message has been understood as it was intended to be.

Ask the recipient of feedback to summarise what you have said. Listen to what they are saying, and watch how they respond.

As the receiver, try to avoid misunderstandings by:-

1. Actively listening to what has been said.
2. Observing any non-verbal behaviour.
3. Asking for clarification of any unclear verbal or non verbal messages.
4. Summarising your understanding at regular intervals.

A coach should adopt the following guidelines: -

- You *should focus on the behaviour and not the person*. This is the most important point to bear in mind. This avoids personal attack and the

feedback is reinforcing good behaviours or attempting to change undesired behaviours.

- Be assertive and aware of your rights as well as those of the other person.
- Don't be aggressive or overbearing and don't be non-assertive, apologetic or meek and mild.
- Be direct (not blunt) and to the point and don't 'beat about the bush.'
- Avoid sarcasm and demeaning comments.
- Avoid blaming the individual with aggressive 'you' statements.
- Display appropriate body language, especially in terms of eye contact, body positioning and physical mannerisms.
- Be specific about the good or bad behaviours and be non-judgemental.
- Mutually explore and possibly offer suggestions or options for improvement or change.

3. Develop your questioning skills

Coaches who develop the skill of questioning rather than telling should then be able to proceed from here by the use of more open questions to get the coachee talking. Helping the coachee identify the situation for themselves is a most powerful and effective way to give feedback and will increase greatly the chances of acceptance by the coachee.

When asking questions, try to use open questions which encourage the interviewee to talk. These are difficult to answer with a 'yes' or a 'no'. Open questions begin with 'What,' 'Why,' 'When,' 'How,' 'Where' or 'Who'.

4. Beginning the feedback encounter

At the start of the interview it is important to devote time to establishing rapport. The time allowed should vary but it should not be rushed. Any encounter that increases self awareness can be a very threatening process and many recipients are conditioned to view it as a negative and not a positive process. *'It will tell me what I am poor at, not what I am good at'* or *'It will prove I am not up to scratch'* is the kind of thinking they may portray. The coach will need to combat this.

It is important to begin by explaining the situation. You could start by asking an open question such as:-

'How do you think you did?'

'How did you feel about that?'

'How would you assess your performance yesterday?'

It may be helpful for you to mentally rehearse your approach, particularly the opening, even to the extent of writing out your opening and repeating it to yourself several times so that you are familiar with it and say it naturally. You should aim to give the criticism as early as possible in the interview.

At the interview it is advisable to: -

- Get to the point quickly, and be specific. You should state what the problem is, and where appropriate, how the problem is affecting them, you, your customers, your work area or the team. You should have specific facts at your disposal to support your comments.
- Own what you say. Use the 'I' word and take responsibility for what you are saying. Don't use 'you' – it is blaming. These sorts of phrases are usually appropriate:
- 'I want....', 'I think...', 'I would like...', 'I don't like...', 'I know that...'

A number of useful phrases are: -

'The ratings indicate that.....', 'The indications are that.....', 'Measured against previous scores.....', 'The video replay shows...'

Unhelpful phrases are: - 'You are.....', 'This is a poor rating on.....', 'One area of weakness is...', 'I have rarely seen a performance that bad....', 'That was awful...'

- Remember to focus on the behaviour and not the person.
- Use assertive body language. A loud voice, finger wagging, inability to look the recipient in the eye, are *not* recommended. People are much more comfortable if you look at them directly and in a calm, unemotional manner.
- Explore weaknesses or development areas by letting the recipient identify the weakness or mistakes for themselves, and considering the benefits of change.
- Explore suggestions for improvement. While you should know what you want in terms of outcome, you can ask for suggestions from the recipient first before suggesting your own. They may well suggest what you want, which will increase ownership. Useful phrases here are:

'What do you think we should do?'

'How can we resolve this?'

'Let's consider the options.'

Obtain (if appropriate) a commitment to change with the recognition that if change is possible, the onus is on the coachee. Establish the level of support required from you as coach.

5. Giving negative feedback

Many coaches view giving criticism with distaste. They are apprehensive about the response as well as their own feelings. They should remember, however, that many positive benefits can accrue from properly administered constructive criticism, and that problems must be confronted if future success is to be achieved. Remember also, that there is probably greater potential to learn from our mistakes than from our successes. The feedback interview involving criticism should be constructive and not destructive, so that everything that is said will be viewed as helpful and developmental. A separate Checklist goes into this issue in more detail (See Related Checklists).

6. Giving positive feedback

Work with the positives whenever you can. Praise conveys recognition of good behaviour and/or performance. As a coach, one of your roles is to help to motivate coachees and reinforce good habits, behaviour and performance. Praise is, if administered correctly, a very powerful way of doing this.

In the 1950s, a Canadian psychotherapist, Eric Berne, developed a model called Transactional Analysis (TA). One concept associated with TA is strokes. A stroke is a unit of social recognition and there are three types: positive strokes (praise), negative strokes (criticism), and no strokes (being ignored). Positive strokes are positive feedback or 'warm fuzzies'. They recognise effort, make us feel valued and secure, and increase self esteem and confidence. In short, they make people feel good about themselves.

Whilst giving praise is a more palatable task than giving criticism, it can still cause embarrassment to both the giver and the recipient, and therefore may not be given as frequently as it should be. A coach needs to prepare well in order to get the

recipient to accept the praise as sincere, and to use it to reinforce good work so that it continues and motivation levels increase.

At the interview it is advisable to: -

- Deliver your opening statement, which you should have rehearsed.
- Deliver the praise as soon as possible.
- Be specific by saying exactly what pleased you and how it affected you, your customers, your work area or the team. For example: "All the estimates you have done for me this past month have been accurate, well presented, and accepted by the management team, which has reflected well on the department and myself."
- Keep it short and to the point. Don't gush and go over the top, as this may be perceived as insincere, and it may also devalue future praise. Equally, don't adopt a patronising manner, as this will irritate the recipient.
- Own what you say. Use the 'I' word and take responsibility for what you are saying. So, "the company would like to place on record its appreciation of....." is not as good as: 'I appreciate...'
- Don't belittle yourself by inflating others into gods and giants, for example, "You have got more tact in your little finger than I've got in my whole body."
- Use assertive body language. If you are calm and unemotional, look the recipient in the eye, smile and have an open posture, you won't go far wrong.

Remember: **It is not what you say, but how you say it!**

Managers should avoid:

- Destructive criticism
- Being poorly prepared and rushing the feedback encounter
- Ambiguous messages which lack clarity.

Additional resources

Books

Interpersonal skills at work, 2nd edition, John Hayes
Hove: Routledge, 2002

Complete feedback skills training book, Sue Bishop
Aldershot: Gower, 2000

Body language at work, Adrian Furnham
London: Institute of Personnel and Development, 1999

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the Management Information Centre. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/mic

Related checklists

Coaching for better performance (089)
Devising a coaching programme (224)
Giving criticism as a coach (223)

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