

Feedback Essentials

Good, regular feedback within an organisation can be an essential tool to help improve performance and morale – yet many people shy away from it. This article explains why feedback is important, why people avoid it and how to circumvent this to ensure effective, productive feedback throughout your organisation.



Why is feedback important?

“Meaningful feedback is central to performance management. Feedback guides, motivates, and reinforces effective behaviors and reduces or stops ineffective behaviors.” [1]

Feedback is a key component in employee development at all levels. Without external feedback on their job performance, people tend to revert to internal self-assessment, judging themselves against their own goals and expectations. There are a number of problems with this. Firstly, their goals and expectations may not match those of the organisation. Secondly, depending on their personality, most people will naturally rate themselves either more generously or more harshly than others would – agreement between internal and external evaluations are rare in an environment where feedback is absent.

The benefits of effective feedback

Well constructed and delivered feedback has a number of benefits for individuals and companies. It helps people to:

- understand job expectations and measure their performance against them
- know what they do well
- identify opportunities for learning and development

- set achievable goals
- identify what is, and is not, within their control
- feel more involved and motivated
- take control of their own performance
- increase self-awareness

While from an organisational perspective, good feedback should:

- reinforce good working habits
- redirect poor working habits
- improve working relationships
- improve business performance

Fear of feedback



Despite these benefits, many people are uncomfortable with giving or receiving feedback. People tend to shy away from being evaluated by others unless they are confident the results will be positive - even if the feedback will be constructive and help them improve. Some people even feel uncomfortable with receiving praise, finding it embarrassing.

At the same time, those asked to give feedback may be concerned about how the other person will react to critical feedback, fearing that it could damage personal and professional relationships, especially if the person becomes emotional or strongly disagrees with the feedback. Equally, some feel awkward about giving praise, especially in public, perhaps worrying that it will, indeed, embarrass the employee.

These are all natural responses, and can be overcome.

The leader's role

If feedback only happens in an organisation when there is an issue to be addressed, then feedback, when given, is likely to cause anxiety and defensiveness amongst employees. The best way to address this issue is to establish a strong culture of feedback throughout your organisation, making it a regular and intrinsic part of working practices. This will also help to ensure that people receive praise when it is merited, as well as constructive feedback when it is required.

There are a number of ways to implement this. Regular performance appraisals are a first step, but these generally do not happen frequently enough to really make feedback a natural part of an organisational culture. Consider setting up monthly or at least quarterly formal feedback mechanisms for all employees.

When thinking about introducing a formal feedback structure, it is important to consider all of the following:

- **Sources:** who will provide feedback? Traditionally, a person's direct supervisor is responsible for giving feedback. However, the 180-degree model of feedback argues for expanding this to also include groups of peers and, if applicable, clients to give a fuller picture of their performance. The 360-degree model takes this even further, advocating the addition of upwards feedback from team members they are responsible for. If you implement 360-degree feedback, consider also whether you will include yourself in the process – this can be beneficial both for you and your employees.
- **Delivery:** who will deliver the feedback? Again, traditionally the role of a supervisor, but there are a number of other options. Consider staff from the HR or L&D departments, or even an external coach or psychologist, who may be better equipped to advise the person on how to use the feedback, as well as being more detached and objective. This also helps remove the risk of damage to ongoing working relationships.
- **Uses:** will the feedback be used strictly for development or also for administrative decisions about pay and promotions? Whichever you decide, do so at the beginning and be honest with staff about it.

Constructive not destructive



Perhaps the most important factor to consider with feedback is ensuring that it is constructive and not destructive to an employee's morale and self-confidence. Remember at all times that the purpose of constructive feedback is not to assign blame, but to identify ways an individual or team can improve or, if necessary, change their behaviour in future. There are a number of approaches to effective delivery, including **BOOST** (Balanced; Observed; Objective; Specific; Timely), **E2C2** (Evidence; Effect; Change; Continue), **CEDAR** (Context; Examples; Diagnosis; Actions; Review) and **AID** (Action; Impact; Do), but the crucial elements are that feedback should always be:

- specific
- fact-based
- timely
- relevant
- balanced
- constructive

It is also important that the person delivering feedback is:

- objective
- unemotional
- receptive
- open-minded

Look forward

It is essential to end a feedback session by looking forward. If the feedback has been positive, it should be easy to encourage the person to continue to build on this. If, on the other hand, it has addressed a need for change or improvement, then it is vital that specific, achievable goals are agreed, with which both parties are comfortable. It is also worth establishing a timeframe to follow up, assess how effective the feedback has been and gauge progress towards the agreed goals.

Summary

Good, constructive, regular feedback, when well delivered, can have a multitude of positive impacts on individuals and organisations. In order to overcome natural aversions to feedback, make it a regular, normal part of working life for employees and leaders alike. Ensuring feedback is both effective and sets realistic goals for improvement is essential in order to maximise its benefits for everyone.

[1] Manuel London, *Job Feedback* (Psychology Press, 2010) p1.

- **Scared baby image:** Flickr User [tomek.pl](#) (accessed 1 November 2013).
- **Yellow bricks image:** Flickr User [Pete Ashton](#) (accessed 1 November 2013).