

Giving Effective Feedback

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Introduction

Contemporary organisational theory emphasises the need for those in positions of authority to actively establish and foster a culture of learning within their organisation. It is also accepted that individual performances are affected by the direct and indirect interactions between members of an organisation. As such, the feedback process within an organisation becomes a significant platform in the ongoing development of its human resources. Put simply, internal feedback can be a powerful agent for skill development and improved behaviours.

However, to achieve its potential, feedback must be delivered in a manner that motivates the recipient and persuades them that the advice offered is both appropriate and worthwhile. This requires a sound theory upon which to act.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to offer a practical and soundly based framework for giving effective feedback.

Why is feedback important?

While we have already suggested that feedback is a vital tool in professional development, it is worth identifying some of the specific reasons why feedback is important.

Difficulty of self assessment. Even someone who is genuinely self reflective and prepared to invest time in reviewing their own interactions is constrained by their subjectivity. That is, our perception of our own performance is invariably filtered through our individual values, attitudes, assumptions and aspirations, which may lead to a somewhat distorted end picture.

By contrast, a colleague has a greater capacity for objective input, especially if they are relatively disinterested in the subject matter of the interaction under review. Moreover, a colleague is better placed to pick up the subtle ingredients which, in combination, go to making up the performance. For example, facial expression, voice quality and body gestures. Finally, a colleague may be sufficiently removed from the performance to help the principal actor distinguish between the intention behind their behaviour and the ultimate impact on their audience.

Commitment to resource allocation decisions. Organisations need to make decisions about how resources will be allocated on an ongoing basis. Offering feedback to individuals affected by these decisions, say through the medium of a performance appraisal, provides an opportunity for management to explain the reasons underlying the decisions with a view to encouraging the individual's agreement and support.

Acknowledgement of identity issues. Finally, feedback is important because it responds to an individual's need for reaffirmation of their personal and professional

identity, and for external information about the health of their significant relationships.¹

What actually happens

Given the apparent importance of offering feedback, it would be reasonable to expect that it would be an inherent feature of all organisations. Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. In the recently published management text "Getting it Done",² the authors identify the following problem:

[We] rarely take time to help someone to do better. We watch a colleague or boss, and think, "he is making a big mistake." But we don't meddle. We don't point out mistakes (or effective practices, either). We think of saying something. We may even put it on our list of things to do. But it stays there day after day. There's always something else we'd rather be doing. The result is that others are not learning much or getting much support from us.

One diagnosis that might be made is that we avoid giving feedback because we lack the skill to do it well. However, for many, giving feedback to a colleague (junior or otherwise) is uncomfortable and perhaps even risky. Intellectually, we can appreciate the importance of helping someone change their current behaviour, but we fear that the process of offering advice or evaluation could damage our relationship. Bound up in this fear is an awareness that some people so closely associate their self-esteem with their professional performance that even helpful feedback may feel like an attack on their self-identity.

This raises the critical question of how can we improve our approach to offering feedback to those around us?

Know your purpose

We would suggest that the key point regarding effective feedback is to know your purpose. Unless you have a clear sense of what it is that you wish to achieve, it is unlikely that you will be effective in delivering feedback.

In our view, there are three purposes that you might have in giving feedback:

Appreciation. By appreciation, we mean encouragement and support. You can help your colleague by praising their hard work, acknowledging their accomplishments, or encouraging them to keep trying.

Coaching. In coaching, we are seeking to help the person improve their performance. Accordingly, coaching would include noting particular successes that ought to be repeated, pointing out unintended consequences of past actions, making suggestions as to future performance and offering advice.

¹ A recent survey cited in the Harvard Business Review indicates that top quality employees value meaningful feedback, learning opportunities and a healthy relationship with their supervisors over financial compensation.

² Fisher, R. & Sharp, A., 1998, *Getting it Done*, Harper Collins Publishers.

Evaluation. In evaluating, the goal is to assess the performance with a view towards allocating resources and measuring success. As such, assigning grades, writing letters of recommendation, and proposing different levels of bonus would all constitute evaluation.

It should be apparent that each purpose is distinct and requires a different approach. In the following pages, we explore the three types of feedback in more detail.

1. Appreciation

Focuses on the person. We all have human needs, one of which is to feel appreciated. appreciation relates to the person – his or her feelings and needs. Appreciation can be praise for a good job, an acknowledgement for hard work or honest effort, or empathy when things don't work out as intended.

Appreciate even if the performance is poor. Regardless of the performance, you can almost always find something to appreciate, because appreciation is about the person, not how well or poorly they performed. For example, John, an advertising executive, was watching a new colleague, Sam during Sam's first formal presentation to a client. Sam was very nervous and didn't perform particularly well. After the presentation, John told Sam that it was clear that he had worked very hard to make the presentation successful. And John meant that. The fact that the performance was a long way short of perfect did not preclude a positive acknowledgement of Sam's effort.

While some need appreciation more than others, as a general rule, all of us need support on some occasions, especially those where our performance is not as good as it might have been. The basic message is to appreciate the person, even if the substance appears undeserving.

Be sincere. We all know how it feels when a colleague "damns us with faint praise". So its important to look for what you can honestly acknowledge. Offering dishonest praise is a mistake. It can make the recipient feel patronised, and undermine their trust in your coaching. It can also send them a distorted message of your real perspectives about their performance.

Everyone needs appreciation. One final comment about appreciation is warranted, and that is we should endeavour to appreciate up, down and sideways. The people who seem to need it the least, that is, those in positions of authority, may be the most desperate for it, because they rarely, if ever, receive it.

2. Effective coaching

Coaching focuses on the performance. As noted earlier, our goal in coaching is to help the person improve their performance. We want them to do more of the things that worked, and determine how to improve upon those that didn't. This is premised on the notion that people can learn both from their successes and their failures.

In order to coach effectively, we need to ensure that our comments are constructive, easy to listen to, encouraging and likely to increase (or at least not reduce) the motivation and confidence of the recipient.

Be tentative. To facilitate this, we advocate a tentative approach. That is, be conscious of the fact that you are only one observer, and that while you can offer your perceptions, it is unlikely that you will be in possession of "the truth".

Start by inquiring. We would also suggest that effective coaching begins with genuine inquiry. So, you might ask your colleague if they want you to give them some advice. You might also ask if they have a preference regarding how and when they would like to receive coaching.

Inquiry also includes asking the recipient what they were trying to do before offering your suggestions about how they might approach the same task in the future. The underlying principle is that before considering how well or poorly someone did, we should first understand what they were intending to achieve. For example, we may think that a supervisor did a terrible job of reviewing their supervisee's performance until we learn that the supervisor's goal was in fact to induce that person to resign.

Further, you might invite your colleague's own assessment of their performance. In some cases, people are already aware of particular mistakes that they have made, obviating the need for you to point out those errors to them. It makes sense that the advice we offer about doing things differently is likely to be more persuasive where there is already an acknowledgement of a deficiency by the person themselves.

Share observations; offer interpretations. Another ingredient in effective coaching is the ability to share observations and offer interpretations, rather than simply stating a conclusion. When we observe a particular event, we interpret it in accordance with our own experiences and values, after which we reach a conclusion. However, others may see things that were not apparent to us, or they may have different interpretations on the same data and, as a result, may reach a different conclusion. To accommodate differences in perceptions and individual values, it is important to recount what you observed as specifically as possible, as well as the reasoning that caused you to draw the conclusions that you did from those observations. In short, offering the data and the hypothesis that you draw from it allows your colleague to understand your reasoning, challenge your data, and perhaps most importantly, conveys that you are open to persuasion.

Try to be interactive. A further related point to note regarding effective coaching is that the feedback should be interactive. You're more likely to persuade your colleague to try to approach things differently if you appear to be open to persuasion yourself. This may simply mean that you give your colleague a chance to tell you about why they chose to proceed in the way that they did. Given the chance to explain, they may inform you about something of which you were previously unaware. Good feedback should not be viewed as a lecture; it is a conversation, albeit a learning conversation.

Make it systematic. Coaching should also be systematic and forward focused. We believe that adhering to a simple pattern when giving feedback reduces any stress

associated with the process. Being systematic is likely to assist you in distinguishing the coaching function from evaluation, and thus increase the likelihood that your suggestions for change will be well received.

One system that you might adopt is to extract lessons both from things that worked well and things that didn't.

Further, while it may be relatively easier to identify problems, it is almost always more useful to generate some ideas for improving performance. For example, telling your colleague that they had a poor interaction with their client is less useful than saying, "when the client raised her voice it may have been more productive if you had stayed calm." It is always helpful to illustrate your comments with concrete examples.

Be congruent. Finally, in coaching, we would stress the need for congruence. Congruence is essentially "practising what we preach". As such, it requires us to model the behaviour that we would like others to exhibit. How we act sends a powerful message to others, and ideally, the non-verbal messages that we send through our behaviour should be consistent with our words. For example, if we want others to listen, then we should demonstrate good listening technique. If we want others to be open to persuasion, then we should try to be open to persuasion ourselves, and so on.

It is generally acknowledged that congruence is powerfully persuasive. This is readily accepted when you consider that few things are less persuasive than someone who tells others to act in a particular way and then fails to conduct themselves in the manner suggested. It follows then that giving feedback in a way that is congruent with what we say is critical.

3. Effective evaluation

Aim for a fair process. Few would disagree that evaluating the performance of others is unpleasant. However, most, if not all, managers accept that it is necessary. The overall guideline that we would suggest is to be fair in evaluating staff. Being clear and predictable is perhaps the best way to demonstrate fairness to the person whose performance is being evaluated. There are several additional approaches that we would recommend.

Allow them time to prepare. It is almost axiomatic that preparation enhances performance, and we would say that this is especially true in the context of giving and receiving feedback. As a corollary of allowing them time to prepare, you should ensure that you have allocated sufficient time to your own preparation.

Be purposive. The person who is being evaluated should be aware of what the evaluation is being used for. This provides them with an opportunity to raise anything that they feel might be relevant in the evaluation process. As such, it contributes to the fairness of the process (or perception thereof).

Create clear standards. In CMA's negotiation training, we recommend that negotiators use objective criteria to make decisions. Our reasoning is that when you offer objective standards of fairness to explain or legitimise your perspectives, you

reduce the prospect of the discussion becoming a contest of wills. The same applies when giving evaluative feedback. Basing conclusions upon objective standards makes the evaluation process feel more legitimate. It also informs the individual of what they need to do in order to succeed - if they don't know what success looks like, they can hardly be faulted for not achieving it.

Establish regular procedures. We would argue that performance should be reviewed at regular intervals rather than only when things go wrong. This offers the person being evaluated the opportunity to alter their behaviour before the consequences become unavoidable. Given the considerable investment organisations make in their human resources, this approach makes good sense financially as well as being fair.

Conclusion

When undertaken skillfully, there are few processes that contribute more to individual self-esteem and the development of powerful relationships in an organisation, than offering feedback. Indeed, one might say that the health of any organisation can be measured, at least in part, according to the frequency and quality of intraorganisational feedback.

Adopting a best practice approach to giving feedback is largely facilitated by being aware of the different purposes that you might have in offering it. Simply being aware of the differences between appreciation, coaching and evaluation and the circumstances in which they are best offered, helps us to deal with substantive points (making decisions about resource allocation and offering advice about skill development) separately from emotional and self identity issues. As a result, we are able to improve the way that things get done within our organisations without damaging important relationships in the process.

One way to achieve a heightened self-awareness and best practice in giving feedback is to adopt a fresh set of assumptions about the process. Here are three assumptions that might be considered.

Appreciation makes everyone perform better. Accordingly, it makes sense to promote an environment in which everyone is encouraged to offer appreciation to the people with whom they are working, irrespective of hierarchy or levels of authority.

Asking for coaching is a sign of strength. An organisation that fosters an appreciation of the need for continuing learning and self-development should encourage everyone to seek coaching input. Implicit in this advice is a recognition of the fact that everyone can offer important tips for improving performance, again, irrespective of their status in the organisation. Moreover, when a person in a senior position demonstrates an openness to learning it encourages those in less senior positions to adopt a similar approach.

Evaluation should be used infrequently. We sometimes feel as though all feedback needs to be evaluative when so much of it is really designed to motivate someone or improve their current approach. Because evaluation can have a powerful

impact on relationships, it is best confined to those situations where decision-making about resource allocation is unavoidable.

Further reading

Getting it Done, Roger Fisher and Alan Sharp, Harper Business 1999; see especially Chapter 7 (available through internet bookshops)

How to Keep Your Company's Star Employees, Edward Prewitt, Harvard Business Review, January 1999. (available through www.hbsp.harvard.edu)

The Four Myths of Feedback, Higgins and Smith, Harvard Business Review, January 1999. (available through www.hbsp.harvard.edu)