

Giving Feedback

Keeping Team Member Performance High, and Well-Integrated

"Performance review." Does the mere mention of this event make your heart sink?

Employees and managers the world over dread this ritual and therein lays the main problem: We have institutionalized the giving and receiving of feedback. We save up our comments and document all the things we note about a person's performance. And then, like a big cat ready to pounce, the manager brings a hapless employee into the office and springs a year's worth of "constructive criticism" onto him or her.

No doubt the process is seen as unnerving and fear provoking. And this is exactly the wrong emotional environment in which to discuss performance, introduce suggestions for improvement, and talk about goals for the future. This is a shame, because giving and receiving feedback is some of the most important communication you can engage in with members of your team.

When done in the right way and with the right intentions, feedback communication is the avenue to performance greatness. Employees have to know what they are doing well and not so well. For them to really hear your thoughts and suggestions on ways to improve, though, that feedback has to be delivered carefully and frequently. Giving feedback effectively is a skill. And like all skills, it takes practice to build your confidence and improve. The following is a collection of "feedback giving" tips that you can start putting into practice today.

Tip:

We talk generally about feedback between a manager/supervisor and employee. However, feedback can, and should, be given up, down, and laterally. The same principles apply.

Giving Feedback Effectively

Number One Rule: Try to Make it a Positive Process and Experience

Before giving feedback make sure you remind yourself why you are doing it. The purpose for giving feedback is to improve the situation or performance. You won't accomplish that by being harsh, critical, or offensive. That's not to say you must always be positive. There is a role for negativity and even anger if someone isn't paying sufficient attention to what you're saying. However this should be used sparingly. You'll most often get much more from people when your approach is positive and focused on improvement. (Use tools like the [Feedback Matrix](#) and the [Losada Ratio](#) to help you get the balance right.)

Be Timely

The closer to the event you address the issue, the better. Feedback isn't about surprising someone so the sooner you do it, the more the person will be expecting it.

Think of it this way: It's much easier to feed back about a single one-hour job that hasn't been done properly than it is to feed back about a whole year of failed one-hour jobs.

Tip:

The exception to this is if the situation involved is highly emotional. Here, wait until everyone has calmed down before you engage in feedback. You can't risk letting yourself get worked up and risk saying something you will regret later.

Make it Regular

Feedback is a process that requires constant attention. When something needs to be said, say it. People then know where they stand all the time and there are few surprises. Also, problems don't get out of hand. This is **not** a once-a-year or a once-every-three-month event. While this may be the timing of formal feedback, informal, simple feedback should be given much more often than this – perhaps every week or even every day, depending on the situation.

With frequent informal feedback like this, nothing said during formal feedback sessions should be unexpected, surprising or particularly difficult.

Prepare Your Comments

You don't want to read a script but you do need to be clear about you are going to say. This helps you stay on track and stick to the issues.

Be Specific

Tell the person exactly what they need to improve on. This ensures that you stick to facts and there is less room for ambiguity. If you tell someone they acted unprofessionally, what does that mean exactly? Were they too loud, too friendly, too casual, too flip or too poorly dressed?

Remember to stick to what you know first-hand: You'll quickly find yourself on shaky ground if you start giving feedback based on other people's views.

Tip:

Try not to exaggerate to make a point. Avoid words like "never", "all," and "always" because the person will get defensive. Always discuss the direct impact of the behavior and don't get personal or seek to blame.

Criticize in Private

While public recognition is appreciated, public scrutiny is not. Establish a safe place to talk where you won't be interrupted or overheard.

Use "I" Statements

Give the feedback from your perspective. This way you avoid labeling the person. Say, "I was angry and hurt when you criticized my report in front of my boss" rather than "You were insensitive yesterday."

Limit Your Focus

A feedback session should discuss no more than two issues. Any more than that and you risk the person feeling attacked and demoralized. You should also stick to behaviors the person can actually change or influence.

Talk about Positives Too

A good rule is start off with something positive. This helps put the person at ease. It also lets them "see" what success looks like and this helps them to take the right steps next time.

As long as it's not forced, it can also help to give positive feedback at the end of a feedback session too. Otherwise, people can finish feeling despondent and worthless.

Tip:

Many people can tend to overdo this and they end up sandwiching the constructive feedback between too many positives. Then the takeaway message becomes, "Gee, I'm doing really well" instead of "I'm good at communicating with customers, but I need to bring my interpersonal skills with my co-workers up to that same level."

Provide Specific Suggestions

Make sure you both know what needs to be done to improve the situation. The main message should be that you care and want to help the person grow and develop. Set goals and make plans to monitor and evaluate progress. Use the **SMART** acronym and define specific steps and milestones, or the **GROW model** to motivate people to deliver the change you want.

Tip:

You may not agree on everything so it is a good idea to ask the person to provide their perspective. Use phrases like, "What is your reaction to this?" or "Is this a fair representation of what happened?" Listen actively to what he or she has to say and try to get him or her to offer some suggestions for improvement. This way they have an opportunity to own the solution and are much more likely to follow through with it. To avoid sounding like you're preaching, stay away from words like "good," "bad," "must," "need to," etc.

Follow Up

The whole purpose of feedback is to improve performance. You need to measure whether or not that is happening and then make adjustments as you go. Be sure to document your conversations and discuss what is working and what needs to be modified.

Tip:

It's also important that you actively seek feedback from your boss, colleagues, and customers. See our article on [Getting Feedback](#) for more on this.

Key Points

Feedback is a two-way street. You need to know how to give it effectively and at the same time model how to receive it constructively.

When you make a conscious choice to give and receive feedback on a regular basis you demonstrate that feedback is a powerful means of personal development. Done properly, feedback need not be agonizing, demoralizing, or daunting and the more practice you get the better you will become at it. It may never be your favorite means of communicating with employees, co-workers, or bosses but it does have the potential to make your workplace a much more productive and harmonious place to be.