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How to Deliver Good Feedback

By

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Most of us have walked away from a tricky conversation or confrontation with staff either wishing we had handled it better or having failed to deliver the feedback we wanted. *Kate Kerrison* looks at how the experts suggest you handle these difficult moments.

A state sales manager of a large organisation undertook his scheduled performance appraisal and no significant issues were raised. Then about three months later he was the subject of a 360 degree performance review.

“It was absolutely terrible,” according to Jennifer Morris, Managing Director of Orijen, a workforce planning consultancy specialising in mentoring. “Everyone from his boss to his staff thought he was a terrible manager and it was completely out of line with his self-assessment.”

“Even though it was negative, he still welcomed the feedback. What he was very upset about was that it hadn't been given sooner, particularly when he had just had a performance appraisal.”

Morris believes the key to delivering feedback is to be objective and talk about the incident rather than the person.

“Listen, stay open, and ask quality questions so you get the whole story and reflect that back to make sure you have understood it before you start delivering feedback,” she says.

“If people avoid confrontation they need to understand that is part of their natural behavioural style, and then understand what drives that before they can start to change their behaviour through skills training.

“It comes back to understanding themselves. Some people find it very difficult to empathise and for them, the facts are all that is important. Other people just want to be liked and that is what's important to them.”

Morris says avoidance or worry about confrontation can be a real issue as feedback should be given immediately – she feels that in many cases delays occur because people simply don't know how to deal with it.

She says managers need to remember that “it's pretty hard to think of anyone who doesn't want feedback, even if it does raise issues”.

A director of communications company Rogen International, James Budin, believes the most common mistake people make when it comes to delivering feedback is being reactive.

“Something happens and instead of stopping and thinking about it, the individual reacts emotionally and then wishes they didn't,” he says.

Budin says a lot of people avoid giving feedback or constructive criticism and the main reason for this is that they don't know how. “A lot of people will also look to avoid conflict because they don't want to hurt people's feelings, or they want to protect themselves due to internal political pressure.”

“The best way to deal with it is to think about the implications of giving the feedback or not giving the feedback. Is it really important that I tell this person what I think, or am I doing it purely for emotional reasons?”

Dr Simon Moss, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Monash University, says managers who do not provide feedback and ascribe failures and shortfalls to the skills, strategies and effort of their employees actually impair the performance of their workgroup.

“Managers strive to comfort employees who have not fulfilled their targets,” he says. “To provide this comfort, managers often claim these failures can be ascribed to factors that could not have been prevented, such as economic decline.

“Unfortunately, after they receive this advice, employees tend to feel that obstacles they cannot prevent will constrain their performance in the future. They feel helpless and thus unconfident, unmotivated, and bitter.”

He says employees should primarily be praised when their motivation has declined, but such praise needs to be genuine. “If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything nice.”

While most agree that feedback is critical in today's business environment, Christopher Shen, organisational psychologist and Principal of CJS High Performance Consulting, a provider of high performance psychology solutions in organisational psychology, human resources and business consulting, says there are exceptions. Some employees like to receive constant praise as well as advice, but in some cases employees feel frustrated whenever they receive feedback.

“In particular, employees who like to set their own goals, objectives and targets often feel their autonomy is violated if they receive feedback too often, which induces stress and resentment,” he says.

Shen believes that managers who primarily praise rather than criticise their employees, can actually impede productivity and satisfaction in the workplace.

“Training programs often encourage managers to praise their employees whenever possible. But research reveals that excessive praise can be damaging. Many employees feel they should be more cooperative and effective at work. Hence, to address this sense of guilt, they cooperate extensively with colleagues and devote more effort to their work. Unfortunately, the praise they receive from managers can overcome this guilt and thus restrict their motivation to assist colleagues or work more vigorously.”

According to Shen, Human Resources practitioners can advise managers when to provide feedback.

Shen agrees with Moss that given managers often receive a bitter or defensive response from employees when they raise any criticisms, they tend to soften their feedback with compliments, apologies and excuses.

But Budin maintains that feedback needs to be balanced with praise or acknowledgement of good work.

“A good way to lead into a conversation is to acknowledge the positives and the good work and then to be very specific – here's what happened, here's the impact of it in the workplace or with clients and this is what we would have preferred.”

“Some people think they are good at delivering criticism and say things like ‘I just deliver it straight and clearly’. But what they actually leave behind them is a trail of destruction.”

In their book *Crucial Confrontations*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler say that to confront someone is to hold them accountable, face-to-face. “Although the word can sound abrasive, that's not what we have in mind,” they say.

“In fact when confrontations are handled correctly, both parties talk openly and honestly. Both are candid and respectful, and as a result problems are resolved and relationships benefit.”

They point out that in a study of management style and success across dozens of organisations “it didn't take long to learn what set opinion leaders away from the pack.

“It wasn't their technical skills, their title or even something as intangible as their charisma. Opinion leaders wielded influence because they were best at stepping up to colleagues, co-workers - or even their bosses and holding them accountable.”

Jim Budin agrees, saying only a small percentage of people – between 20 and 30 per cent – are naturally good at delivering feedback, with most people finding it “stressful and confrontational”.

Most people can learn how to do it, but it depends in part on their natural behavioural style.

“People who are respected as leaders and who are unconsciously good leaders tend to have high levels of compassion and empathy which links in with good feedback capabilities.”

He says the ability to coach or provide feedback is a key leadership skill in today's business environment. “Babyboomers were more used to a hierarchical and dictatorial approach to management, whereas generations X and Y won't put up with it. They want feedback.

“People need to begin to think like a coach in the business. They need to ask themselves ‘am I point-scoring or am I trying to make this a better and more successful workplace?’

“The best way to deal with it is to stop, pause, take a breath and plan a response,” he concludes.

Giving feedback – guidelines for coaches

Presenting the case

- Pick the right opportunity. Don't ambush!
- Avoid a long preamble.
- Avoid using the words 'Listen...!' and 'but...!'

Timeliness, accuracy, simplicity

- Don't let issues pile-up – deal with one or two issues at once.
- Avoid absolute terms like “always” and “never”.
- Think carefully about how you are going to express yourself. Be simple and accurate.

Focus on what can be changed

- It is useless to criticise people for characteristics which they cannot easily change.
- Avoid personal remarks.
- Focus on observable behaviours that CAN be changed via coaching/training.

Avoid comparisons

- No-one likes to be described as inferior.
- Comparisons predispose others not to listen, even when criticism is justified.
- Comparisons will usually miss the mark.

Don't discuss motives

- It is too easy to draw the wrong conclusion.
- Be aware that the person themselves is often not wholly aware why they do or avoid certain things.
- Avoid amateur psychology.

After critique don't apologise

- Apology will only raise the mental conflict as to whether you should have raised the problem in the first place.

- Apologising is also a sign of lack of moral courage.
- Thank them for listening.

Source: Rogen International

Further reading

'The Happy Worker', David Moloney, *Management (NZ)*, May 2004, pp. 72

'Telling it like it is', Shawn Callahan, *HRMonthly*, December/January 2004, pp. 42-44

'Have a Heart: Heap the praise not the poison', Tom Watking, *Management (NZ)*, March, 2004, pp. 46-48

'Hubbard, Gattung and Tindall on warm-hearted, cool-headed and hard-nosed leadership', Kate Frykberg, *Management (NZ)*, February 2004, pp. 37-39

'Executives behaving badly', Suzanne Keen, *HRMonthly*, September 2004, pp. 21, 23, 25-26, 28

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