

How to give effective feedback



by Kriss Will

In my column in the summer 2005 issue, I wrote about how to receive feedback and offered several ideas on how to make the receiving of performance feedback a positive and valuable experience. This column is intended to provide some guidance to those giving such feedback.

Giving feedback

Feedback is a great tool for motivating, teaching, encouraging, recognising and developing staff. Rarely do people think they receive enough. Often, people only know if something goes wrong and never if something goes right. It plays an essential role in day-to-day performance management and shouldn't be kept only for the annual appraisal.

Many people feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback, but most agree that if their performance was not meeting expectations, they'd rather know of the concern. There's nothing worse than hearing on the grapevine that a staff member is not up to standard, when the person making these comments hasn't seen fit to have the discussion with the person concerned.

It's essential that one develop the ability to give effective feedback, as it's a fundamental skill for managing people and is not just for formal review time.

This article covers the basics of giving feedback during a formalised review process as well as day-to-day. Remember, the more you practise, the easier it will become.

Formalised feedback

In a formalised feedback process, preparation is the key. The key preparation points are:

- Provide relevant examples
- Consider examples over the whole period, not just most recent examples
- Decide the key areas for improvement and why they need to improve
- Try to avoid blaming a person for their weaknesses and take a 'here is where

you need to learn/improve' approach

- Discuss the person's performance with those for whom they work most, as people may hold different views from yours
- Preparation is complete and reviewers have met briefly to ensure that they agree as to what's going to be said and how. It's important that the people attending the discussion as reviewers have sufficient knowledge of the person's work.

Adequate time needs to be allowed for the discussion, as it's a priority, especially for the person being reviewed. It leaves a poor impression if you have to leave the meeting for another.

During the discussion

Note-taking duties are allocated at the start of the session and everyone is aware of why notes are being taken. I recommend that an action plan be generated from each review and that the staff member takes responsibility for following this through in the ensuing months. In relation to the action plan, try to ensure the person being reviewed takes on the responsibility for the action, not you as the reviewer.

Where possible, when discussing areas for improvement, use constructive phrases such as 'You can improve in this area by ...', 'The challenge I see for you over the next year is ...', 'Your work in this area is not yet at the level I would expect ...', 'Your strength in this area is ...', or 'Your weaker area is ...'

As a reviewer, you're also likely to be asked questions. If you don't know the answer, say you'll come back to the person rather than making a pressured decision/comment.

Be prepared for feedback in relation to your performance and don't respond in a defensive manner. If the feedback is a surprise, say that you'll take it on board, consider it, and then come back to the person in relation to that point.

Day-to-day feedback

It's important to give feedback day-to-day, not just at the annual review time. There are three key aspects to consider – timing, content and tone.

Consider carefully the timing

- Soon after the event is best, as it's fresh in people's minds
- If feedback is likely to embarrass someone, give this feedback privately

■ If you feel angry at the time, it's best to calm down first

■ Don't save up concerns and then bombard someone at a later date.

Be specific as to content

- Ensure you really understand what has occurred first
- Deal with a specific matter and concentrate on that
- Give examples of how the work could improve
- Discuss behaviour, not attitude
- Don't discuss other people's shortcomings
- Seek clarification from persons concerned.

Consider the tone you're using, as it speaks volumes

- Your tone will communicate as much as any words
- Be aware that nervousness may come through in different ways, including rushing, anger and flippancy.

A few quick tips

Other members of the business, like you, will have bad days. Take this into account when giving feedback.

Avoid using the sandwich technique (a piece of good news, inserting the real message – the bad news – and finishing with a piece of good news). This mixed message often leads to confusion – you think you've given the constructive feedback and the person may only remember the positive aspects of the conversation.

Keep the outcome in mind and work towards this. Rehearsing what you want to say prior to having the discussion can make the actual discussion more effective as you're less likely to be nervous and have had time to again consider your words and approach.

As you become more senior, there is a change from having a teacher-student relationship to a professional-peer relationship. The latter may see communication become more direct and this can take some people by surprise. Be aware of this change. ■

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