

Feedback, the right way

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Feedback is a tool used at all levels to encourage and improve performance. In this article *Andy Taylor* explains the process to achieve the best results with feedback.

Feedback (noun) - *comments in the form of opinions about and reactions to something, intended to provide useful information for future decisions and development.* The dictionary definition of feedback states clearly what it is and what it should achieve, so why do we find it hard to deliver good, relevant and honest feedback consistently?

Feedback is an opinion of the observer on the actions of another. This is where we start to encounter problems. An opinion is formed from many things. Mainly our emotions and how we feel at any given time in any given situation. This then causes the reaction to the observed action. The reaction will cause a response which in the form of feedback has the power to destroy confidence or to empower the receiver. Giving feedback is a skill that takes practice and sensitivity. Given correctly it will build an individual's confidence and provide them the drive to improve. Used incorrectly it will knock their confidence and possibly cause further performance issues.

Feedback has the power to Destroy confidence or to empower the receiver

Feedback has many applications in business. It is used at annual appraisals, team meetings, disciplinary hearings, interviews, coaching and training and in our day to day activities. Customer complaints are feedback for an organisation to gauge how it is performing. All these things have an impact on how individuals and teams perform. The art of giving feedback can impact positively if given correctly.

The Approach

The approach you take has a big impact on how the feedback is delivered and received.

There are a number of approaches to delivering feedback, one of which is the feedback sandwich.

The principle of the feedback sandwich is that you start by saying what you liked about the performance and end with what you liked overall (the bread). In the middle of this you put the



Filling, what you would like to see improved.

Giving BEST Feedback

Behaviour
Effect
Suggestions
Transformation

makes you describe the behaviour you have seen and state the affect that it has had on you or others. It then offers suggestions to improve - the key to good feedback; from this you should see a transformation - the improvement.

There is also the ABC model

Appreciate
Balanced
Constructive

In this model you appreciate the behaviour or performance that you have observed in a balanced way and then provide constructive ways in which it could be improved.

Another approach to providing feedback is to do it as a coach. In this approach you ask questions to gauge opinion of the performer to gauge their understanding of what they have done.

The opening question could be something along the lines of *'How do you feel that went?'* By listening to the answer you can then probe with further questions, for example:

Observer: *'How do you feel that went?'*

Performer: *'It went well'*

Observer: *'What went well?'*

Performer: *'the way I handled the situation'*

Observer: *'What in particular?'*

Performer: *'The questions I asked'*

Observer: *'What sort of questions did you ask?'*

Performer: *'Open questions which gave me a lot of information'*

Observer: *'What else went well?'*

Performer: *'I am not sure'*

Observer: *'Is there anything you would improve?'*

Using this approach gets the performer to think about their performance and to provide evidence to support their statements. At each answer you probe further to get them to think a bit deeper. What you are looking for is the stumper - the question that gives you the *'I don't know'* answer. This is where you change direction and ask them what they would improve and why and then how. After they have done this you provide your feedback to either back what they are saying or to offer another view.

In this approach you need to *'own'* your statements with *'I'*



statements, i.e. 'I liked the questions you used, they were open and to the point'. When you come to the improvement part, again use the 'I' statement, i.e. 'I would like to see.....' This way you have not made it personal and then they have the choice of taking on board your feedback or not.

Feedback is a skill that takes time and practice to perfect and then be improved upon. Taking notes when observing behaviour can help you keep on topic and be specific. This will make your feedback more relevant and accepting. It is nice when you have practiced and given feedback that people come to you for feedback because they value your input. This can also be dangerous as if your feedback is 'too kind' it can have the reverse effect of negative feedback and provide 'false confidence' which tells the receiver that everything is Ok when in fact there are areas that require immediate change to avoid issues, costs and embarrassment later.

When you give feedback the receiver may argue with you about what you saw or feel. If this happens either

1. Stop giving feedback
2. Ask them to wait until you have finished to comment

This is an area that makes giving feedback difficult. If the person receiving the feedback does not agree with it and they get argumentative it makes it difficult to give feedback in the future. If you stop giving feedback it tells the receiver that their action is unacceptable. Don't get drawn into an argument with them. This will only make the situation worse and make it harder for you in the future.

Some phrases to avoid when giving feedback are:

- It was good
- It was OK
- It was alright

These should be avoided unless you are going to quantify them - back it up with evidence. It was good does nothing as feedback unless you state why it was good and how it made you feel. It was OK is a nothing statement. This is learning towards 'it was bad'. The same with 'it was alright'. Neither is positive and can leave the performer feeling flat. Always quantify your statements with actual events and evidence.

One rule of feedback is just because you are giving it, the person you are giving it to does not need to take it on board. It is their feedback to do with whatever they want.

Summary

When giving feedback:

Do:

- Be specific
- Build on the positives
- Comment on what you saw
- Own the feedback by using 'I' statements i.e. 'I liked...', 'I enjoyed...'
- Be critical where needed but, offer suggestions to improve at the same time
- If you are unclear what was happening ask for clarification
- Base it on evidence

Don't:

- Focus on the negative
- Sugar coat it
- Get side tracked
- Get drawn into an argument
- Don't guess what you saw