How to Provide Effective Performance Feedback

Many supervisors dread providing feedback to their direct reports. Some fear that holding a candid conversation about job performance will damage otherwise positive relationships with employees. Others feel uncomfortable with the potential for interpersonal conflict. Avoidance may appear to be the easiest solution in the short term, but in most cases, avoidance only postpones any potential conflict and may cause it to intensify. A far more effective approach to managing and improving employee performance is to actively engage your direct reports in candid discussions. Discussion should include performance expectations, recognition of positive accomplishments throughout the year, and a discussion of overall performance during end-of-year summary evaluations.

In this issue, we offer guidelines that will allow you to provide the structure and language you need to hold an effective performance discussion. An effective feedback process will enhance relationships with your direct reports instead of creating barriers or ill will that may detract from individual or institutional performance. These guidelines can be applied during standard annual performance evaluations or during the year as “teachable moments” may occur throughout the year.

Recommended Guidelines for Providing Performance Feedback

Choose an appropriate feedback setting. Choose an appropriate feedback setting. Employees expect to receive feedback during the annual performance review process, but strong research evidence indicates that feedback is more effective in changing behavior when delivered more closely in time to the behavior observed (see Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, for a comprehensive review). Provide feedback, especially negative feedback, in a private one-on-one setting whenever possible. Publicly criticizing a direct report is demeaning for that person and sends the message to everyone else that you are not a supportive manager. Take time to carefully hone your message and state that your goal in having the conversation is to work with him/her to enhance (or continue) the behaviors you are discussing. Give your direct report sufficient time to absorb what you are saying and respond to your comments. Allow for a two-way discussion to emerge by asking for the employee’s reactions, and ask for his/her ideas on how to change (or continue) the behavior.

Focus on the facts. Feedback should highlight the specific behaviors you want to either praise or adjust, not focus on the person’s personality or on assumptions about why the behaviors occurred. Be prepared to provide examples of situations in which you observed this behavior and why it was or was not effective. For example, instead of characterizing an employee as “efficient” or “difficult,” offer examples of specific occasions when the faculty member demonstrated these behaviors. (See “Expanding Your Feedback Vocabulary,” this issue, for more on this topic.) Be open to new facts or perspectives the direct report may offer that may change your interpretation or perspective on the behavior.

(continued on next page)

The Research Evidence* is Clear: Performance Feedback Makes the Difference in...

Job performance: Specific, timely feedback measurably improves job performance among medical professionals.

Satisfaction and retention: Employees are more likely to be satisfied and stay in their current position if their supervisor provides useful, constructive feedback.

Learning and development: Feedback provides faculty members with the information and tools they need to adapt their behavior and adjust more effectively to new situations.

* A complete list of references for this issue is available on the Faculty Forward private site.
Balance positive and negative feedback. Managers frequently overlook the need to provide specific positive feedback, so do consider the relative frequency with which you compliment or criticize any given direct report over time. If the feedback message is developed in a way the direct report can understand and accept, it is not necessary to provide a mix of positive and negative feedback during the same discussion. In fact, purposefully offering stand-alone positive feedback from time to time (i.e., catch your employees “doing something right”) can help to establish the kind of open, constructive relationship that allows you to convey constructive feedback more easily (Weitzel, 2000).

Provide development opportunities. Sometimes it only takes a gentle reminder to guide performance in the right direction. At other times, direct reports will need specific opportunities to learn and apply a new set of skills or behaviors before they can demonstrate improved performance. Talk with your direct reports about their priorities for development, assess how these priorities align with organizational goals and incentives, and agree on a development plan targeted to address the highest priorities (Peterson & Hicks, 1996). (See “Active Listening,” this issue, for details on how to hold this discussion.) Development opportunities may include training classes, one-on-one coaching conversations, or other learning opportunities, and should include clear occasions to practice new skills on the job. In discussions where you are assessing direct reports’ broad development needs, ask them how they view their own strengths and development needs, and find out what they find interesting or engaging about their role at the institution. Design a development plan that incorporates the aspects of the role they find most engaging.

Follow through. Providing feedback and development opportunities may be necessary but not sufficient for creating performance improvement. Supervisors should follow up with their direct reports to check progress in implementing the agreed-upon changes, to identify any barriers preventing change, and to recognize and reward performance improvements. To emphasize the importance of addressing a specific behavioral issue, you might schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss the employee’s progress; in some situations, you may choose to include the issue as a developmental goal on the direct report’s annual performance review. Without some follow-up activity and interest from you, your employees may not have the incentives or the tools to make lasting changes in behavior.

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**Faculty Forward Survey Results (2009)**

- 80% of respondents report receiving performance feedback from their leadership; only 67% of these respondents are satisfied with the frequency of this feedback.

- Among faculty who do not receive feedback from their leadership, 76% consider feedback to be important or very important. Faculty who are in clinical roles, in more junior positions, female, or racial/ethnic minorities are significantly more likely to consider feedback to be important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>ALL FACULTY</th>
<th>DEPARTMENT TYPE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Basic science</td>
<td>Clinical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you receive feedback about your performance from your unit head?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How important would it be to receive feedback about your performance from your unit head (if no feedback currently)?</td>
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<td>76.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with usefulness of feedback from unit head on career performance</td>
<td>Satisfied or Very satisfied</td>
<td>3921</td>
<td>70.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with frequency of feedback from unit head on career performance</td>
<td>Satisfied or Very satisfied</td>
<td>3714</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Active listening: the first step toward effective feedback and development

Adapted from Leader as Coach, PDI, 1996

To provide useful, constructive performance feedback, you should develop some understanding of your direct reports’ interests, motivations, and professional goals. Don’t assume what they want. Ask your employees some direct, open questions and take time to listen to their answers. The feedback you provide is more likely to be accepted if you understand the employee’s developmental interests.

• What do you see as your professional strengths?
• What areas would you like to develop further?
• How much does professional development matter to you?
• What excites you about coming to work?
• What situations at work cause you the most stress?
• What are your short- and long-term development goals?
• Do you feel like these goals are within your reach?
• What resources or support do you think you need to reach these goals?

As you work to understand your direct reports, keep in mind the following:

• Double check that you’ve heard and interpreted their words correctly – periodically restate your perceptions (e.g., state the obvious and give them a chance to respond
• When your employees exhibit strong emotions about a challenge or opportunity at work, pay attention; find out why they are reacting this way

Expanding Your Feedback Vocabulary

by Kevin Grigsby, D.S.W.
Senior Director of Organizational Leadership Development at the AAMC

• Start your comments with “I,” not with “you.”
• Don’t follow with “always” or “never.”
• Follow “I” with “feel” and then describe your affective state.
• Follow your feelings with “when,” not with “because.”
• Offer feedback in the form of describing the person’s behavior.
• Suggest specific alternative behaviors, i.e., “please let me finish my comments at meetings before speaking.”

Subordinate Feedback Checklist

Excerpted with permission from “Giving Feedback to Subordinates.” Copyright © 1999 Center for Creative Leadership.

Consult this checklist regularly to remind you of the main elements involved when you give feedback to subordinates.

☐ Give feedback frequently
☐ Make feedback timely; don’t wait too long after observing a behavior you’d like to address
☐ Keep feedback simple
☐ Provide a private, neutral setting when your feedback concerns behavior that must be corrected
☐ Focus on the situation you have observed
☐ Describe the subordinate’s behavior without interpreting motives
☐ Communicate the impact of the subordinate’s behavior
☐ Offer your subordinates suggestions and support for making changes in their behavior
☐ Take your subordinate’s information style into account and be prepared for unexpected information
☐ Leverage your subordinate’s strengths
☐ Catch people “doing things right”

“To provide useful, constructive performance feedback, you should develop some understanding of your direct reports’ interests, motivations, and professional goals.”