

A report by Sharon Peters, Ph.D.

Feedback

Newsroom
employees
want it,
managers
avoid it

Feedback

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Feedback: The overview

Whatever one calls it — performance coaching, constructive criticism, positive reinforcement — it all falls under the rubric of feedback.

The word “feedback” was originally an engineering term: One part of the system affects others, causing them to react accordingly.

And feedback at work should be precisely that: a response immediately following an event, so that employees have information about how their efforts played, whether good or bad.

Actions and events that should trigger feedback are “significant incidents,” according to management expert Harry Levinson, Ph.D., publisher of *The Levinson Letter*, a twice-monthly publication of the Levinson Institute in Belmont, Mass. Those would include any actions or words, including inaction or silence, that illustrate a subordinate’s behavior and ability or inability to do certain kinds of work.

So, feedback, in its starkest, most straightforward sense is the manager’s expressed reaction to an employee’s action or lack of action vis-à-vis the department’s or the organization’s goals or well-being.

Others describe feedback in a more prosaic, imagery-rich way. The Zenger Miller Frontline Leadership training program used by many newsrooms in the 1990s, for example, describes feedback this way: “It serves those who need to perform and reach goals at work much like a compass helps a hiker moving through difficult or uncharted terrain. It directs them toward their destination and guides them back on track when they stray.”

Feedback, then, serves as a course-corrector.

It also serves as a self-image balancer. People continually experience self-doubt and self-criticism, Levinson points out. “These spring from largely unconscious sources and there’s no way for the person to turn them off.

“That is not to say that they need continual praise or ego boosting. They need whatever feedback is valid. They need to know they’re doing well when they are so they don’t underrate themselves, and they need to know when they’re not doing well so they can improve rather than worry and wait for an unspecified ax to fall.” (*Levinson Letter*, Feb. 2, 1992.)

This need among employees for performance confirmation or redirection cannot be overstated, experts say.

But it’s not merely — or even primarily — a humanistic desire to soothe the psyches of employees that should prompt managers to take a closer look at the virtues

It’s essential

Wanting to improve requires a willingness to accept critical feedback.

Nobody is perfect

Help employees break free of the trap of believing they must be perfect. The sooner they let go of their need to be perfect the sooner they will give up being defensive about constructive criticism and begin to address their shortcomings.

Any employee, regardless of whether s/he is a high-performer or a marginal one, needs to hear from the boss.

Supervisors shy away from it

Giving feedback of any type, constructive criticism in particular, is perhaps the most dreaded of all management duties. Supervisors' reluctance runs the gamut:

- I might hurt their feelings.
- I might hack them off and they'll do even worse.
- The discussion will come down to who's right and who's wrong.
- I don't feel right telling off someone who has been in the business longer than I have.
- This guy's been like this for 20 years. Nothing I say will change him.
- It will get ugly.

All of it springs from a fundamental fear: They will not do it right, and they will not see any positive result.

They may be correct. Newsroom managers typically get very little performance training, and giving constructive feedback is a talent most people don't come by naturally. To make matters worse, good feedback behavior from the top rungs that up-and-coming managers can emulate is rare in newsrooms.

It is a situation that must be corrected. Not merely because of the growing level of frustration of employees weary of being in the dark about how they're doing, but because of the inarguable need for newspaper employees to get better at what they do.

Feedback isn't just an unpleasant obligation of those in power. It is the most direct route to performance improvement and building effective working relationships. And these days, newspapers do not have the luxury of being passive in those two areas.

Employees want it

The message is clear.

Newsroom employees want more feedback from their bosses.

Hundreds of newsroom employees who participated in ASNE's 2001 Leadership study identified feedback, positive reinforcement, constructive criticism and performance coaching as major shortfalls in U.S. newsrooms. They said:

- Providing too little performance coaching is the most significant failing of their immediate supervisor.
- Regularly providing constructive criticism is an area in which their immediate supervisor is very ineffective.
- Giving regular feedback, doing more coaching and “appreciating my workload” (which should be interpreted as “occasionally commenting on my hard work”) are the most desired improvements in supervisors.

Giving regular recognition/criticism is the very most important skill or trait of an immediate supervisor, they said. But they want more feedback from all layers of the hierarchy. When the same journalists were asked to comment on their top-editor level (identified as managing editor and higher), they consistently made reference to communication/feedback issues.

The 2001 findings confirmed many in a 1999 study of newsroom middle managers, which the Media Management Center published under the title *Caught in the Middle*. In that one, regular feedback and performance coaching received among the lowest scores when employees were asked to rate middle managers in 11 supervisory skills.

Clearly, there is a perceived feedback deficit. And it's not just the whiners, the very young or the hopelessly insecure who feel it. In a 1996 Media Management Center research report entitled *In Their Prime*, 90 percent of high-performing reporters over age 40 expressed a desire for more feedback — positive and negative — from their supervisors. Some of their comments:

“I kind of wish I got dragged over the coals more often.”

“I don't get enough, good or bad. I especially wish they'd say it directly when they're disappointed.”

“We're way too kind to each other, not honest enough. I have a few friends who are really candid about my work and I need that.”

“I never know how I'm doing.”

“No one is ever beyond constructive criticism.”

“I need to be told if I have an accurate self-image.”

“Strong reporters, especially, don't get enough. Editors have this feeling that ‘it's his job to be good,’ so you never hear a word if you've done good work. At the same time, I can't remember anyone telling me in recent years that I could have done better.”

of feedback.

Why feedback is important

“When a manager ignores the importance of feedback he or she ... keeps marginally performing employees functioning below par. It compromises the department’s (or organization’s) overall performance and weakens employee confidence in the manager’s ability to lead the department,” according to the American Management Association publication, *Getting Results* (Edition A, Dec. 1997, Vol. 42, No. 12, p. 8).

Without regular feedback, most employees’ performance and professional development are likely to be erratic. With it, there is likely to be a fairly linear line of improvement.

“They want and need timely, detailed observations about their work to reinforce what they do well and help them overcome weak spots,” according to *Getting Results*.

Regular feedback has been shown in many studies to improve employee and organizational performance. Former newspaper editor Robert Giles highlighted several researchers’ findings in his 1991 book *Newsroom Management*, including:

- Studies of high achievers show that workers perform better when they have specific goals and high levels of feedback.
- Receiving feedback is an important component in effective goal-setting for employees. “It serves to keep staffers on target and encourages them to push for a greater effort. A reporter can correct a story-organization problem more effectively if the city editor routinely offers suggestions and observations.” (Giles, p. 67.)

A specific bit of feedback may address goal setting or course correcting, another confirm or correct an employee’s self-image. But every single bit of feedback accomplishes one overarching cause: It takes a lot of the mystery out of the workplace. Most employees, even the really good ones, slog through work every day without a clear sense of how they fit into the overall scheme of things, how they’re regarded, how they could get better, how they might get ahead. Solid feedback answers all those questions.

Feedback should be frequent

A big dose at annual review time is not enough.

Any decent newsroom’s goals and standards shift from time to time. Any person’s performance has peaks and valleys over time. And everyone but sociopaths have ongoing concern about how their efforts are playing. So feedback must be regular.

It also must address the good, as well as the bad and the ugly. Constructive criticism is most effective with employees who have had victories in the past, who possess a reasonably strong awareness that perfect performance every hour of every day isn’t possible, but that scoring a hit is achievable. So it is important that managers catch employees doing something right, and tell them so.

Be consistent

Feedback must be consistent with the messages you’re sending. If you say, for example, you regard mistakes as a learning experience but punish or criticize people who make a mistake, that’s inconsistent.

This positive reinforcement element is often missing from the equation. As management expert Ken Blanchard points out in *Everyone's a Coach* (HarperBusiness, 1995), the book he wrote with Miami Dolphins Coach Don Shula, the most frequent response people get to their performance is no response at all. Then a mistake or screw-up happens, and the manager swoops in with a vengeance. Blanchard terms this "seagull management." "Seagull managers fly in, make a lot of noise ... then fly off somewhere."

Finally, whatever criticism is offered must be handled appropriately (straight-forwardly, without sarcasm, brutality or vagueness), but also personally, face to face.

"Managers who feel uncomfortable giving praise or criticism or both often find ways to impersonalize the process," Levinson wrote in his treatise on feedback. "They feel that there should not be anything personal about it, just an exchange of information. But in fact it should be face to face in person. Without that there's something missing. Managers are most effective when they become figures with whom their subordinates identify their own aspirations. That doesn't require the manager to be superhuman or even especially friendly but it does require him or her to be competent and caring. To become a focus of identification is to enter a relationship so it is indeed personal." ❧

Constructive criticism

Getting it right

Criticism should:

- Be about specific actions or behaviors
- Include only things the employee is capable of doing something about
- Be given at a time when he appears ready to accept it, not when he is angry, upset or defensive
- Include no more than he can accommodate at one time.

The complete message

There are elements of a supervisor's delivery that have even more impact than the words.

Many studies have shown that the words spoken account for only about 10 percent of the emotional impact of a verbal message.

The voice quality (including pitch, rate and volume), tone of the delivery (neutral, sarcastic, angry or whatever), and nonverbals (facial expressions, eye contact, gestures and posture) account for more than 90 percent.

Criticism has a bad name, the result of eons of being ineptly delivered. Indeed, so awful is its reputation that some companies and management experts have taken to giving it other labels. "Caring confrontation," "constructive feedback," and "appreciative feedback" are among them.

Some management experts even suggest that no term at all be used, and that when bad news is about to be delivered by boss to subordinate, the boss use the code phrase, "May I coach you?" No one has recommended what tack the boss might take should the subordinate respond, "No."

Criticism by any other name is still criticism. And the saner of the management experts who actually have some contact with real-life workplaces argue that there is no useful reason for clouding it or coloring it or giving it a perky title.

The reality is there's a need and a place for criticism in the workplace, even if managers almost never find it especially easy to give. Employees sometimes do not perform up to expectations, and the boss should be candid about that. To do otherwise is unfair to the employee who is not performing well, to all the other employees in the department, and to the organization.

When managers take the avoidance approach, many things happen, none of them good:

- The staff realizes that there apparently are no consequences for poor performance. And the water level of the entire department lowers.
- The inadequate employee, who might have improved through tough performance coaching, loses that opportunity. Worse, he recognizes that something is not right between him and the boss. The atmosphere grows dense with tension. The employee becomes increasingly edgy about this new, mysterious dynamic, and his performance slides even more.
- Everyone on the staff sees this happen. And the manager loses trust and respect. This is clearly unfair treatment of any person.
- It can be as hard for the supervisor to deliver constructive criticism as it is for the employee to hear it. But if it is framed and approached in the right way — that this is a way for the manager to help an employee improve her work and, presumably, assist in her long-term professional development — much of the heat and angst dissipates.

The major don'ts for managers

- Don't initiate the discussion when you are angry.
- Don't put off the conversation indefinitely. Have it as soon as you are clear about the facts and what you want changed.
- Don't try to soften the blow by giving feedback over lunch. This is business. You're sending a confused message by pretending it's a casual get-together.
- Don't offer explanations, excuses, rationales or motives for the unacceptable performance. Your role is not to analyze or come up with explanations the employee can use to justify patterns or lapses.
- Don't take the performance failure personally, and don't get emotional. Rarely is poor performance intended as an affront to the boss.
- Don't make sweeping statements like, "You always miss deadlines," which gives the employee an opening to refute you by bringing to your attention the three times he did, in fact, make a deadline. Give specific examples of missed deadlines
- Don't say the employee has a poor attitude. Give examples of behavior that you regard as unacceptable.
- Don't direct your criticism at the person ("You're the slowest reporter who ever worked for me") but at the behavior ("You're taking too much time to report and write stories.")
- Don't make inexplicit demands like "When are you going to start living up to your potential?" That fosters defensiveness and resentment, and accomplishes nothing in the way of improving performance.
- Don't belabor your point.
- Don't have a feedback session if all you really want to do is vent. There are two purposes for feedback meetings: for negative feedback it is to correct a problem, for supportive feedback it is to reinforce behavior you want continued. If what you want to accomplish is getting things off your chest, talk to your shrink, not your employee.

Here's how to do it

The difficult sit-down should be conducted this way:

- Open the conversation by stating the purpose of the meeting, which is "I want to give you some feedback on your work. I have some suggestions for improving it." Often, newsroom managers are so stressed at the notion of delivering bad news that they natter on about today's breaking story and their plans for the weekend, slipping in a sentence or two — in the most non-threatening, vaguest terms — about the performance flaw. Then they get frustrated when the behavior doesn't change.

"Evasive maneuvering just makes the subordinate distrustful and even more anxious. When the real nugget of feedback is never expressed directly and specifically or when it is sandwiched between a lot of padding, the subordinate comes away not really sure what the message was," Levinson says.

- Be very specific about exactly what's wrong and how it must improve.

Simply telling someone that her work or behavior is poor is destructive. It provides no clue about why or how she's missing the mark, or what would qualify as acceptable.

Making it work

Labeling someone is rarely useful. Give specifics instead.

Don't say

"You are a dominating person."

"You are a control freak."

Say

"Just now, when we were deciding the issue, you didn't listen to what others said, leaving the impression that we had to accept your arguments or face attack from you."

"Today there were ideal opportunities for you to give your assistant a chance to develop new skills. But instead of assigning her to head up those projects, you kept them."

■ The Zenger Miller program and others suggest that managers express their personal feelings about or reaction to the targeted behavior. (i.e. "When you come in consistently late, it bothers me because I assume you don't really have a full commitment to your job.") Others, including myself, say supervisors should not do that. There are three reasons: Most employees are not very interested in their bosses' emotions so its useless to share them; the boss is giving the employee an outlet to spend time focused not on the problem/solution but on arguing that the boss's interpretation of the actions is incorrect; and it suggests that success is more about pleasing the boss than doing better work. That said, there are some circumstances and some employees for which the sharing-reactions technique can work well. As one expert writes, "Personal feedback helps people consider changing their behavior by revealing to them the feelings aroused in others or by enabling them to see themselves as others do." (*Organizational Behavior*, Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, West Publishing Company, New York, 1983, p. 159.)

■ Keep your comments focused on the situation you want changed. You're criticizing not the person, but the offending action or behavior. It's generally only when managers say or imply they believe the employee is fundamentally just plain bad, incompetent, lazy or riddled with any of countless other character flaws that the discussion becomes hostile or extremely defensive.

Some experts suggest that at this point the employee be given the opportunity to have his say — to explain why whatever happened happened. I am not among those who subscribe to this approach. I say a constructive criticism session is not the time to have a prolonged conversation because the employee can become more focused on making his arguments and assessing the impact of those arguments than on accepting responsibility for doing better in the future. While the supervisor is duty-bound to hear the employee's version of why the thing that went wrong went wrong, that

conversation should transpire much earlier in the process, when the boss is researching the situation, not when she has concluded it is time for change. Still, there are some experts who make quite reasonable arguments that adults respond best when there is conversation, not a soliloquy. And that is something that might be worth considering.

- After you've identified the problem and your suggestions for improvement, have the employee reiterate key points using his own language. This moves him from passive listener to an acknowledger who accepts the need to focus on the steps he plans to take for a positive result. This strategy also gives you early warning if some part of your message was not heard or was incorrectly interpreted.
- Express confidence that the employee will be able to make the changes you have outlined and he has reiterated. This reassures him it is worthwhile to make the effort, and that's a pretty strong motivator. Indeed, there is much in social science literature that indicates employees will live up to the boss's expectations. If an employee perceives the boss's expectation is that he will fail, he will.
- Set up a precise time a few days or weeks hence for the two of you to meet and discuss the employee's progress. This follow-up is every bit as important as the initial conversation. The absence of scheduled follow-up sessions allows the employee to take one of two routes: He might conclude — quite rationally — that the issue wasn't really a big deal, and be disinclined to do much to fix it. Conversely, he might become quite fixated on the issue, and apply great effort to it. That kind of employee needs reassurance that you'll recognize his progress and appreciate it. If he doesn't hear from you, he will assume the worst, and that sabotages his chance of success.
- Recognize that immediate, dramatic turnarounds are rare. Be happy for incremental progress, and tell the employee when you see it.

Positive feedback

Positive feedback is a good thing, of course. Any worker, regardless of her job, likes to hear she's doing well, that her efforts are valued. All people work better when they're reasonably confident they're performing to the standards expected.

That said, it is possible for managers to mishandle positive feedback.

A manager who praises excessively or indiscriminately can jeopardize quality and damage staff motivation and his/her own credibility.

Indiscriminate praise doesn't happen often in newsrooms, but it happens.

For example: There's a copy editor who writes consistently bad headlines.

She has a great attitude, everyone likes her, and there are some copy-editing tasks she does pretty well. But she is notorious for her awful headlines, and even she knows there's a certain amount of quiet talk about her hopelessly stupid headlines. She has, in fact, become quite fragile and defensive about headline writing. The boss, sensing this, wants to bolster her confidence. So he takes to wandering over every now and then and saying, "You're doing a great job. I just wanted to tell you."

Bad move.

First, the awful headline writer assumes she has moved beyond her bad spell and is doing fine now, and she is no longer motivated to pay much attention to improving headlines.

Second, the whole staff overhears these comments and concludes the boss has no quality standards for headlines. Eventually they all ratchet back their efforts a bit, assuming extra effort isn't called for.

Third, whenever the boss gives positive reinforcement to deserving people in the future, it is accepted with a grain of salt, as everyone knows this boss hands out compliments like candy at Halloween.

So because of excessive or inappropriate praise from the boss, the offending headline writer is not motivated to improve, the staff's performance has been dampened and the boss is regarded as a fool or a liar.

In one regard positive reinforcement and constructive criticism are identical: Each must be driven by and issued about a specific action or behavior. When positive reinforcement is specific, it defines for the recipient (and everyone who overhears it) exactly what you regard as praiseworthy. This encourages everyone to attempt to reach that level again.

Positive reinforcement is the most powerful motivator that can be employed by any boss. But it achieves that goal only when the manager is reinforcing something very specific, and when that action or behavior surpassed the group norms.

Finding the balance

It is true that an overly negative environment or boss can thwart creativity and motivation, and that poorly handled criticism can be very damaging to individuals and the organization.

It is also true that approaching almost anything from a positive angle rather than a negative one is generally a more effective way of getting the desired results.

But the real-world fact is there are employees who routinely show up late for work or unfailingly miss deadlines or consistently do sloppy work. And praising them every day for keeping tidy desks is unlikely to have a significant impact on the unacceptable behavior.

Feedback is a two-pronged process; it can be positive or negative. Employee performance is also two-pronged; there are elements of any person's performance that are very positive, and elements that are not. Each of the prongs must be acknowledged and addressed separately.

Problem is, when an employee is mostly good, managers have a strong tendency to apply what social scientists refer to as the "halo effect" to the person.

The boss grows so captivated by the positives that the negatives are completely overlooked or ignored.

Conversely, a boss who is dealing with an employee guilty of some unacceptable actions or behaviors eventually sees that person as having no redeeming professional or organizational value whatever.

Although employees are rarely that monolithic in their professional skills and behaviors, the feedback all employees receive, if any, tends to be very one-sided. So the "perfect employee" never or seldom hears where she's falling short or how she

Model the reaction you want

Newsroom managers are a pretty thin-skinned lot. This does not foster open, useful feedback. So newsroom managers should shift the tide, beginning with themselves. Each manager should:

- Ask for feedback. If you ask you're clearly willing to examine your own performance and consider ways to improve. It signals to co-workers that you're open-minded and focused on quality, not ego.
- Listen. Any person's first inclination to constructive criticism is to think of explanations. This defensive reaction is counter-productive to performance improvement. Ask for clarifications and advice on how to handle the situation better in the future.
- Thank the person who offers feedback.
- Do regular appraisals. Formal performance reviews provide a structured opportunity to give feedback. And while they should never take the place of ongoing regular feedback, they offer one more chance for both the giver and receiver to become more comfortable with feedback.

Let people learn

Avoid appearing critical of someone who is having trouble learning a new skill. Negative feedback when someone is trying, but simply learning differently or slower than others, is inappropriate and demotivates.

could improve her work. And the hideously bad employee rarely or never gets a word of praise for the positive things he brings to the workplace. Both are de-motivated, albeit in entirely different, but equally destructive ways.

This tendency to pigeon-hole employees into an all-good or all-bad box is yet another reason to give feedback instantly. When you see the great employee falter or the bad employee show a spark and you react instantly, you prevent yourself from dousing their behavior with your overall impression.



Could it be they're deaf?

Often, despite a manager's best efforts, the employee simply doesn't hear, process and/or properly respond to the feedback. And most managers, confronted with such eventualities, usually give up.

Wrong reaction.

There are a few things working against negative information always being immediately received and responded to.

Social scientists have found that people are much more likely to search for and pay attention to information that can confirm their beliefs (especially about themselves) than information that can disconfirm them. That is why our self-image is so remarkably stable over time. This was first discovered at the University of Texas, where researchers found that without exception students seek, elicit and recall feedback that confirms their own beliefs about themselves. For that reason, it is quite likely that employees hearing feedback that doesn't jibe with their own self-image (whether good or bad) will discount that in favor of whatever is in the message that does coincide with their own beliefs. So messages in conflict with an employee's self-image must be issued again and again.

But while it is quite likely that constructive criticism will be diluted by the employee/receiver, it is equally likely that constructive criticism will be diluted or otherwise obfuscated by the manager/sender.

Researchers observing managers giving constructive criticism or negative feedback to employees have identified a couple of patterns that all but ensure failure:

- Criticism buried in rambling conversation. Many managers are so conflicted over the notion of having to say "there is something you must do better" that they are indirect to the point of being incomprehensible. They initiate a seemingly casual conversation, drop a veiled remark into the midst of it, then exit hurriedly, convinced for all the world that they have sent a message only a fool would ignore.

- Criticism buried in apologia. Many managers are so convinced of the emotional fragility of employees that they moderate every bit of criticism with phrases like "I know these things are subjective" or "I understand it's really tough to ..." or "I acknowledge that ..." This kind of phrasing does not suggest to anyone, emotionally fragile or otherwise, that some sort of action is required of them. Worse, it signals that the boss feels compelled to search for explanations and justifications whenever an employee fails to be perfect every minute of the day.

- "Criticism buried in a praise sandwich." This praise-criticize-praise formula is, sadly, sometimes recommended even by some management experts.

The rationale behind this approach seems to be that negative feedback is more palatable when you start out by telling him how well he does some tasks (to make him more at ease), then segue into the criticism, then end the session by reiterating

the good things he does (so he's left with a good feeling).

Here's why that rarely works: Many employees will hear only the good (confirming what they already believe about themselves). Many employees will, over time, distrust the boss's sincerity, since it appears the boss believes she can criticize only once she has issued an obligatory, perfunctory compliment. And all employees, "become conditioned to the fact that when they were praised it was a signal that some criticism was just around the corner," writes organizational expert Paul Murchinsky in *Psychology Applied to Work* (Brooks/Cole Publishing, Pacific Grove, Calif., 1990, p. 261). The last one obliterates forever a manager's capability to effectively issue the very important positive reinforcement.

So clearly there are scores of obstacles — constructed by not only the receiver but also the sender — that prevent a message from having the desired impact.

There are some reasonably simple things managers can do to improve the chances of getting the desired response:

- Deliver the message succinctly in a single-purpose conversation. No small talk, no diversionary tactics, no prolonged discourse.
- Understand that a single message probably must be repeated over and over before it is appropriately responded to. You may be able to speed up the process by asking the employee to restate in his/her own words what the problem is, and how it will be addressed. In this way you will discover if your message has been unclear, misinterpreted or so thoroughly filtered by the receiver as to have rendered it useless. If it turns out that your message was, in fact, lost in the translation, you'll be able to restate in different language that which you need to communicate until you achieve the right combination of words to reach this person.

Not wanting to be the bearer of bad tidings is normal. So common is it that there is a name for it. Algolophobia. It means literally "fear of painful talking," and it describes the aversion to or avoidance of saying something difficult.

The fact that it is common does not make it acceptable behavior, especially among managers, who have as a key responsibility the job of managing the performance of others.

As management coach Patti Hathaway points out, "Open feedback can relieve stress, permitting people to stop playing games of guessing at expectations" (*Giving and Receiving Feedback*, Crisp Learning, Menlo Park, Calif., 1998, p. 43).

Feedback is a great stabilizer.



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