



the well-Practiced manager

A Professional Development Resource for University Managers and Supervisors

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Performance Feedback

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK is information that allows us to make adjustments, mid-stride, in our performance. We all want feedback that tells us when our performance is on target and when it is not. We want to succeed—and helpful feedback makes success possible.

Myths about performance feedback sometimes get in our way of giving it to others or listening to it and taking it in when it is about our own performance. Let's explore (and explode) some of those myths:

Myth #1: Feedback is either positive or negative.

Myth #2: Feedback that is negative is unhelpful.

Myth #3: Managers are responsible for giving all feedback.

Myth #1: Feedback is Either Positive or Negative

when we define feedback as either positive or negative, we have closed out some very useful options for dialogue. Feedback is information and the best feedback is descriptive information—middle-zone feedback—that tells us what is happening. It is an observation about the work, our performance, and the results.

Middle-zone feedback is neutral, without a positive spin or a negative feel to it. It is a conversation where observations and comments are exchanged, similar to a dialogue between two laboratory researchers describing what they see under the microscope:

“I see that this problem keeps occurring. What do you think is happening here?”

“These results are interesting. What was your approach to this project?”

Middle-Zone Feedback

Middle-zone feedback is where small changes can be made, where low-risk conversations can take place, and where we are most open to new ideas and directions. These are collaborative conversations built on mutual honesty and respect. Increase the frequency of useful, middle-zone conversations about work and you will improve productivity, morale, and work quality.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Over the years, I've received lots of performance feedback. Most of it was welcome information that helped me to adjust my performance. I think we all hold onto the illusion that we should never need to hear anything but praise about our work. And when that does not happen, we are a little disappointed in ourselves—and sometimes annoyed with the speaker.

It's not easy to be magnanimous and gracious when the message is a hard one. But this is our growing edge—our potential for improvement—and we are better for knowing this information than not knowing it.

I urge you to give clear performance feedback to others and to seek it for yourself in the spirit of open, honest dialogue. It works!

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think about what it would be like to pick up a guitar for the first time and start strumming and singing. We might think we sound terrific, but without feedback from others who are skilled at playing and singing, we miss the opportunity to improve our skill.

Without feedback there is no learning.

Once you've given negative feedback to someone, expect that they will act on that information. Don't dilute your message by soft-pedaling it, leaving loopholes open, or getting sidetracked. Hold people accountable for good results. Tell them when they are producing unwanted results. Think of it as a fairness issue—wouldn't you want to know if you were not measuring up?

Myth #2: Feedback That is Negative is Unhelpful

negative feedback describes unwanted results. The problem with giving or getting negative feedback is that we sometimes wrap emotion into our message, making it harder to hear. Don't be afraid of negative feedback. Deliver a clear, brief message describing the unwanted result, with no extraneous information.

"Your late arrivals are noticed by many people."

"You gave that student incorrect information."

"You handed in the report three days late."

Useful performance feedback tells us what needs to be changed or improved and shows us that we have control over making that change or improvement. You are describing the unwanted result and holding the individual accountable for changing it. Without that helpful feedback, we would continue to miss the mark.

Myth #3: Managers are Responsible for Giving All Feedback in 2005, few managers feel totally in control of their workday. We are all very busy and we are busy doing important things. One of the most important responsibility managers have is managing the performance of others—getting things done through others. This requires us to participate in performance feedback. But we don't have to shoulder all the responsibility—there are additional ways for employees to learn whether their performance is on track.

Additional Feedback Sources

Set measurable goals, timelines, and success measures.

Schedule and hold monthly check-in meetings with each employee to collaboratively evaluate progress toward goals.

Ask the employee to create benchmarks for performance.

Ask employees to assess their own performance prior to performance review meetings.

Use customer satisfaction surveys or focus groups.

Talk about the importance of feedback in staff meetings and highlight innovative ways members of your staff have solicited and received feedback.

Create a feedback-rich culture.

Ask for performance feedback for yourself.

Get into the habit of inviting feedback from your colleagues and from your direct reports.

Ask: "What should I keep doing? What should I stop doing? What should I start doing?"

Consider this . . .

performance feedback is not a cure-all. It sets the stage for a behavior change to occur, but it is not sufficient to sustain that behavior change. Behavior changes are sustained by the consequences—by what happens to the performer as a result of the behavior. People do what they do because of what happens to them when they do it.

You can increase your managerial effectiveness by building feedback-rich opportunities into your work environment. And you can increase your peace of mind by developing a greater tolerance for delivering negative feedback when it is appropriate and fair.

