

Feedback's golden rules

FEEDBACK is a good thing. For managers it's an important tool for shaping behaviour that will drive better performance.

For their direct reports, it's an opportunity for development and career growth.

Why, then, is it so problematic? Most managers say they dislike giving feedback and don't think it's as effective as it could be. Those on the receiving end say they don't get enough useful feedback.

Many reasons account for these opposing views. Strong emotions on both sides and a lack of clarity about what needs to change and why, are just a few of the factors that can undermine a feedback session, write Mark D Cannon and Robert Witherspoon in an Academy of Management Executive article.

How can one improve feedback?

1. Focus on business outcomes.

This should be your starting point for giving feedback. You need to develop talent, boost sales, improve service. When feedback is framed as a means to reach a specific business

Employees want to be told whether they're doing their job well, but feedback needs to be delivered the proper way



goal, it becomes an opportunity to solve a problem rather than criticise.

When feedback is focused on the employee's development, "that makes it a lot more helpful", says Cannon, a professor of leadership and organisational studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "Feedback becomes a gift of someone investing in the recipient's career."

2. Give feedback often.

Feedback works best when it's a continual process rather than a formal session once or twice a year. In fact, experts agree that the yearly performance appraisal is the worst time to surprise an employee with

negative feedback. You're nervous, and so is the employee. With pulse rates up and adrenaline flowing, the natural response is fight or flight, not the thoughtfulness an effective feedback session requires.

Practise giving feedback often; soon it will become a habit. Praise good performance right away.

Give negative feedback within 24 hours.

3. Cite specific, concrete data.

If you've managed your direct reports for a while, you've drawn conclusions about them. That's fine, but don't let these conclusions lead you astray in a feedback session.

Find concrete data that may or may not support your conclusions. Be specific about what needs to change.

4. Don't assume you're right.

Even after you've collected your data, you might not have the complete picture. Other people may see the situation differently.

Furthermore, the employee will have his own side of the story.

"Difficult feedback is rarely about getting the facts right," says Witherspoon, an executive coach.

"It's about conflicting views, feelings and values. Reasonable people differ about all these things."

5. Ask questions: how do you see the situation? How might you do things differently next time? What do you think worked, and what could have gone better?

Questions like these establish a supportive atmosphere in which the employee can explore alternative approaches.

6. Follow through: because managers dread giving feedback, they like to feel that once they've had the conversation, they're done. Not so fast, says Cannon.

Your employees' ability to make that leap requires ongoing support, so follow-through is vital. Ask: "What are the next steps you will take, and how can I support your progress?" Plan to meet again in a month.

7. Gather feedback on how you give feedback.

At the end of a feedback session, ask what your employee thought of the conversation and how you can be more helpful. — *Cynthia M Phoel*
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