



The Keys to Effective Feedback—Give it Often, Give it Quickly, Give it Privately!

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We've all been there. Our boss in passing tells us that they would like to talk to us and to come by their office this afternoon. We immediately start hearing the theme music from Jaws playing in our head and no matter how good our relationship with our boss we start to wonder and worry about what they need to talk to us about. If we are lucky, our boss gives us feedback that provides us with a clear understanding of our performance and we feel confident about ourselves and our abilities to meet the needs of our organization. Unfortunately, this is all too often not the case. Too many of us have a negative experience with feedback regardless of the type of feedback that we receive. We end up feeling discouraged about our jobs, our organizations, and even worse about ourselves.

As the individuals responsible for providing feedback and ensuring our organization functions optimally we are rightly concerned that feedback so often has the opposite effect of what we are trying to achieve. As supervisors we have a responsibility to ensure our subordinates are working positively to affect our organizations. We do this by giving them feedback. In turn, they have an obligation to receive and act on the feedback we give them. How then do we do this if the feedback we give results in negative outcomes?

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Tip of the Month

The Importance of the ING: Plan vs. Planning

Winston Churchill (1874-1965) is known for his many quotes and sayings, including this one: "Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential."

Another leader of that era, Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) had a similar perspective: "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."

Both Churchill and Eisenhower focused on a subtle but critical

difference that focuses on the three small letters, "ING." The subtlety they espoused is the difference between having a plan, and going through the process of planning.

Like these national and military leaders, our small business leaders exist in an ever-changing and unpredictable environment. A detailed PLAN might not survive a major upheaval of markets, the emergence of a new competitor, or a change in industry standards. But, having ongoing PLANNING conversations in your business will

help you:

- identify future opportunities and potential pitfalls,
 - get people aligned behind whole-system actions, and
 - have a guiding tool that may withstand many changing times.
- Churchill and Eisenhower weren't modern-day small business leaders, yet they have a lot of insight into today's changing business culture. They knew that the world wouldn't conform to their strategic plans, but they would reap the immense benefits of planning nonetheless.



“The first step to cultivating ethical leadership in your organization begins with finding employees who share and carry out ethical behavior that is in compliance with your organization’s ethical code.”

The answer rests in giving feedback effectively. At the very least we need to give it in such a way that it does not become an earth shattering occasion that completely destroys our employees and their productivity. Part of the key to giving feedback effectively is to do it often, quickly, and privately. The other key is to focus on the employee’s observable behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors.

Focus on Observable Behaviors

Giving feedback on only observable behaviors ensures that you are not making assumptions about your employees’ intentions. Whether our assumptions are that they have negative or positive intentions, guessing wrong can have undesirable consequences. Consider the example of the employee who has a “bad attitude.” Confronting this employee about their “bad attitude” opens the door to arguments and will only result in them asserting that they don’t have a bad attitude and leave you both feeling frustrated by the encounter. Focusing on observable behaviors such as their comments about the organization, their body language, or their tone of voice lets the employee know exactly what they did that was inappropriate and gives them something specific to focus on for future improvements. The folks at Manager Tools (www.manager-tools.com) provide free management podcasts and have a very simple feedback model that helps you to focus on behaviors and get results from the feedback you give.

Give it Often

The annual performance review, without frequent feedback, epitomizes the problem of feedback that is not timely. It is given once at the end of the year, or even worse months later, and only focuses on what has already happened. Often, the review heavily focuses on behaviors that most recently occurred and completely disregards everything that happened towards the beginning of the year. This type of feedback is neither timely nor does it give the employee a reasonable chance at changing and improving their performance. No matter how laid back your style of management, the annual performance review is almost always felt to be a big deal. The fact that it is very often tied to salary increases only reinforces this perception. Because of the importance and potential impact of the annual performance review it is often demoralizing to employees instead of motivating.

The solution to this problem is to provide feedback regularly, almost immediately and on small everyday actions. Regularly providing feedback reduces the stigma associated with a big feedback event and allows the employee to relax and focus on the behaviors you want. Providing feedback within days or hours of a noted incident or behavior lets the employee know right away that their behavior needs to change or that it is appreciated. Whether they are doing the right thing or the wrong thing, letting them know right away gives them an opportunity to change poor behaviors before they have dug themselves into a hole and to feel good and continue to do the positive things that make your organization successful.





Give it Quickly

Because we value our relationships with our employees we often try to soften the blow of giving corrective feedback by prefacing our conversations with a lot of assumptions and/or preamble. We might say things such as “I know you didn’t mean to…” or “you probably don’t realize…” in our efforts to ease into the conversation. This preamble just serves to give the employee signals that what we are about to tell them is of great importance and raises their anxiety level. When we become anxious we enter flight or fight mode which makes it more difficult to listen and reflect on what is being told to us.

Instead of easing the employee into the feedback remember that you are now giving feedback regularly and on everyday behaviors. There is no need to ease them into it, just be direct. Being direct keeps the message short and helps to keep them focused on your core message. If done well the feedback session will be over before the anxiety sets in and your employee’s reaction will be “Sure, I can do that differently. No big deal.”

Give it Privately

Although most of us don’t mind receiving praise and recognition in public, receiving corrective feedback in public is a whole different story. Most people value doing a good job and derive satisfaction from being a good employee. When our expectations for ourselves don’t match up with our supervisor’s expectations, and even worse our own, we can be left with feelings of shame about our performance. Shame is an excellent motivator... if you want your employees to engage in nonproductive behaviors! Shame only motivates us to not get caught and results in employees who will expend a lot of time and effort to avoid getting caught. Unfortunately this time and effort is at the expense of doing what you actually want them to do. To help prevent this negative shame cycle, don’t give feedback in front of others. This in combination with giving it regularly and quickly on everyday behaviors will help to reduce the shame associated with mistakes.

Future Behavior is the Goal

Remember, the purpose of giving feedback is to encourage the behaviors that you want from your employees. Focusing on observable actions and giving feedback often, quickly, and privately will help you to get there. Don’t make the mistake of only focusing on what they do wrong. Noting and providing feedback on what they are doing right is also encouraging effective behaviors from your staff and should make up the bulk of the feedback that you provide. Make giving feedback a positive habit with your employees.

