

The Trouble with Feedback

Improving Performance Reviews



The employee wore an expression I have seen many, many times – as the performance review ended his face relaxed noticeably. I wouldn't say he seemed at ease exactly; just reverting to a less heightened, more *normal* state of anxiety. The supervisor bore an equally familiar look of grim satisfaction that she'd done what she had to do.

It was a meeting neither of them wanted – not because it was a big deal but because it was so awkward and ineffectual. The supervisor brought no clear feedback and the employee left with no actionable plan. It was, they would both acknowledge later, a waste of time.

The thought that our bosses want to give us “feedback” doesn't inspire positive emotions for most of us. In general, no feedback is good feedback, right? But constructive feedback is essential for improving performance. Without it we seldom recognize let alone break out of bad habits or sub-par routines. The problem is, most performance reviews are pro forma exercises, useless for anything but documenting the kind of offences that lead to termination for cause.

Of course, it's not supposed to be that way; and it doesn't have to be.

The responsibility for making performance reviews work falls squarely on the shoulders of the supervisor. The business leader must learn to move beyond *symptoms* to address the *root causes* of poor performance (or, for that matter, affirm the assets that produce exceptional performance). Many performance issues look remarkably similar on the surface, though they originate from very different causes. Failure to realize the *source* of behavior results in feedback that is unhelpful because it is misdirected and confusing and may be even damaging and destructive. Giving effective and appropriate feedback begins with an understanding that nonperformance emerges from three very different causes. For each cause, there is a fitting approach.

Attitude. If the cause of poor performance is lack of discipline, wrong priorities, or wrong attitude, the most useful feedback is in the form of a **warning**: *Continue down this path and here are the consequences you can anticipate*. Employees who know what is required of them but are unwilling to perform should be put on the hook for their future in the company. On the other side of the coin, feedback for high performance affirms an employee's *industry, initiative, problem solving, follow-through, energy and imagination*.

Fear. If the cause of poor performance is fear or lack of confidence, the best feedback is **encouragement**. Timid workers need help building confidence for the work at hand. Make sure they know what is required of them and have the capacity to perform adequately. Then see that they are mentored until they can perform consistently. Feedback for high performers affirms their *courage, initiative, risk management and innovation*.

Weakness. If the cause of poor performance is the inability to do the task, insufficient resources or a lack of knowledge, training or skill, the only effective feedback is in the form of tangible **help**. Get them the resources, training, manpower and knowledgebase they need to succeed. Feedback for high performers affirms their *resourcefulness, resilience, persistence and loyalty*.

I think we can infer a fourth instruction . . . *don't crosswire these approaches!*

- Don't waste encouragement, training and resources on someone who manifests a consistent lack of discipline or poor attitude. It won't help because that's not the problem!
- Sharp warnings to a person who knows what to do but lacks confidence may be crushing. And offering additional resources and training to timid people will only make them feel more inadequate and overwhelmed. What they need takes the form of coaches who can come along side and help them gain confidence.
- Admonishing a person who really doesn't know what to do or lacks the ability or resources to perform will not help that person any more than cheerleading and encouraging words. They need tangible help.

Abraham Maslow said somewhere, "When you're only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." I've seen way too many leaders fall back on their default motivational style – whether it's the hardnosed directive leader who is always breathing threats, the kindhearted encourager leading cheers to whip up enthusiasm or the natural helper/teacher throwing money at every difficulty. It's time to lay down our hammers and tool up with a more sophisticated skill set. Giving feedback, our focus must not be on how we feel and what we prefer as leaders, but upon our employees and what they need. We must adjust *our* style to give the appropriate feedback.

And a final word, **be patient with everyone**. Genuine patience is scarce in many businesses. Many others substitute *passiveness* for patience and fail to give useful feedback until it's too late. Human performance does not emerge out a playbook of easy fixes and formulas. It takes insight, concern, and patience as well as fierce commitment to do the right thing for employees.

So how are your performance reviews? Do you see signs of attitude problems? Of fear? Of weakness? And do you sense in yourself impatience (or passivity)? If so, do you see how you can get what you need to improve?

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