

Helix Top Tips – on the rare art of giving good feedback

I remember so well the weekly ‘motivational speech’ delivered by Young Mr Grace in ‘Are You Being Served?’ “You’re all doing very well!” he’d tell his staff on his shuffle around the store – hoping to rally the troops.

Well intentioned it may have been, but totally useless. And sadly the quality and quantity of most feedback given in Britain’s businesses is probably not much better. Usually too little, too seldom, too late. Nebulous and non-specific, and often poorly delivered.

Feedback is a gift to the receiver – it helps people understand when they are doing well, how they are contributing effectively to the success of their organisation, or why they need to change their behaviour.

It’s like having spinach on your teeth. You need some feedback in order to know that you need to take some action.

So why don’t people engage in this valuable activity?

Firstly it puts the giver of feedback in an awkward situation, or at least we think it does. Secondly it can be uncomfortable receiving feedback, whether good or bad; it can make us squirm or blush. And thirdly not many of us have the skills to do it effectively. Add to this the lack of *experience* in giving feedback, and its scarcity is wholly understandable. Effective management requires open dialogue, and lots of feedback at the point when it is needed. Positive feedback is relatively easy to give but the more critical the comments, the harder it becomes. Here are our tips for giving feedback – both positive and ‘developmental’:

1. Aim for a culture where feedback ‘just happens’

Easier said than done perhaps, so start with something easy and non-threatening. A team meeting perhaps where you’ve got everyone’s attention. You can give some positive feedback to both individuals and to the group. It gets the process started, and you’ll see pretty quickly that people enjoy the experience and can really benefit from it. This is the beginning of people getting used to feedback.

2. Take it a step further

Positive feedback is relatively easy to give, but the more critical the feedback, the harder it becomes. So here are some principles to keep in mind:

2.1 Take the bull by the horns

If feedback is required, and you miss the opportunity, you can't go back. Give it straight away or very soon after the action or behaviour that caught your attention. Use frequent 'catch ups' or desk reviews with your team to give regular feedback, and don't store it all up for the annual appraisal.

2.2 Focus on the specifics

Feedback needs to relate to something that the individual or team has done, or neglected to do. This is what Young Mr Grace failed to grasp.

2.3 Feedback only on facts and observed behaviour

Responding to tittle-tattle or third party information is hard to substantiate and can cause problems if you try.

2.4 Give feedback for the benefit of the receiver, not for your release or gratification

It should help them improve their performance.

2.5 Focus on what *to do* rather than what *not to do*

"Don't forget to ..." and "Don't spill it" are never particularly helpful or motivating. What should the individual do instead? A colleagues worked for a manager who routinely asked "What went well?" followed by "Even better if..." All team members were asked to consider this after team meetings, customer visits, product launches and the collective feedback meant they all learnt for the next time.

2.6 Balance the good, the bad and the ugly

People need to hear all of it, and if balanced, it is likely to be more meaningful. We quickly tune out if feedback is always good or always bad. People consistently given 'good' feedback, especially that which is poorly delivered, will stop trying (watch out Young Mr Grace!). Equally, those continually given negative feedback will lose their drive to improve.

2.7 Make sure feedback is evenly distributed

It can become easy to cherry pick the favoured few individuals. If badly managed, this and tip 7 can lead to something called 'behaviour extinction'.

3. Ask them what they think

Most people will be harder on themselves than you would be – so use this as a tool. Ask people for their assessment on their own behaviour before you give yours, then you can build them up with some positive observations.

4. Ask for feedback on your own behaviour

This is challenging for some people, but it fosters this culture where giving and receiving feedback is the norm. It enables us to exchange useful information. It builds our feedback skills – and we can all do better which leads us to:

5. Develop feedback skills – learn how to ‘BIFF’

For some people this might require some training, but it is a key skill for managers. I am going to focus here on the feedback situations which are hardest – the ‘problem’ areas, the times when ‘developmental’ feedback is needed: poor performance, poor attendance, not doing things that have been promised, behavioural issues, the list goes on. They are all difficult, and as a result, often nothing is said, giving licence for it to happen again. Good skills development helps your managers develop the ability to give people a ‘BIFF’ - good quality, timely challenge which is both justified and fair, leading the way to performance improvement:

Behaviour: When you do x it has the

Impact of y Which makes me / us

Feel... frustrated... let down... and in

Future I would like you to do z

6. Take some action

The minute you start improving the flow of feedback, you will begin to find out things – things you can act upon like training, communications even housekeeping needs. When Sky set out to more effectively ‘engage’ with their employees, they got lots of feedback. In the top five complaints from staff was the state of the toilets. This was a surprise for management, but easy to fix. And the fixing went a long way in demonstrating commitment from management.

7. Encourage multi-directional feedback

Generate feedback from customers, from peers, from team members, from other departments. 360° is the current parlance. It’s a challenge to get this going, and an even bigger one to keep it going, but it can help develop competitive advantage. Departments and functions within an organisation need to operate *inter*dependently and exchange feedback on that basis. Anyone who saw the Gerry Robinson series on ‘Fixing The NHS’ (January 2007) will have seen the silo effect that becomes all pervasive when functions who rely on each other simply don’t talk.

8. Develop a sense of collective ownership

If everyone is collectively responsible for the performance of the organisation, then individual feedback will seem much less threatening, perhaps even useful... This does require management resilience and lots of dialogue. What causes the rise in customer complaints?

Operations? Supply chain? Is it a marketing issue? Customer services? Or is it an amalgamation of all of these? I know where my money is. Until there is good feedback and dialogue between internal functions, you will most likely be left with finger pointing. “It wasn’t us, it was them”... ad-nauseum.

9. Don’t let up; engage in some tough love with your managers

It is their job to get this feedback flowing around the organisation. It is their job to make use of the knowledge that comes out of this flow of information. Make them do it. And then give them some feedback on how well they’re doing.

Which brings me back to where I started – building a culture where feedback is the norm, where feedback is no longer feared and where it has a positive impact on individual, team and business performance - it is well worth the effort.

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