A Modern Approach to Performance Feedback

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A MODERN APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

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Feedback. We all have delivered it at one point or another, and everyone has certainly received it. Yet, interestingly, for something so ubiquitous, people often feel unsatisfied by the message they've conveyed or received.

Take the slippery, undefined behavioral aspects of giving feedback and layer onto it the fact that it most often occurs in organizational situations of discontent and within a kludgy software platform. This not only adds complexity and bureaucracy, but it also acts to distance the individual delivering and the individual receiving the feedback by way of an impersonal barrier.

If you've been to a doctor's office recently, this should feel familiar: As the United States' move to electronic health records has created a maelstrom of dissatisfied patients and disenfranchisement within the healthcare system, a cottage industry has popped up with books, lectures, conferences, and webinars trying to offer solutions to break down–not increase–the artificial tech barriers to receiving medical care. Technology is not always the best way to approach better communication and information transference and is often the key limiting factor. Healthcare, by its very nature, seems to people to require a personal and face-to-face discussion without distracting elements.

Why should career-trajectory-influencing feedback be any different? The reality: It's not, but there's a great degree of discomfort about it.

According to a 2016 Interact study that Harris Poll conducted, a stunning 69 percent of managers say they are uncomfortable communicating with their staff. And they aren't to blame. Managers generally don't have the credentials to give or write feedback. Most managers (more than 67 percent, according to Gallup) have had no training in performance reviews or giving feedback; further, according to ATD Research, 73 percent of new people managers don't receive training on the topic of feedback until after starting their new role.

Imagine this: If you needed some electrical work done, would you find a contractor who was a credentialed electrician or would you hire anyone who offered to do the job regardless of whether the individual had done it before? Unfortunately for most professionals, great complexity is involved in getting better performance out of people than in almost any other corporate endeavor. Further, there's an incredible void of evidence-based practices for performance reviews and feedback training.

In this *TD at Work*, I will discuss:

- the importance of feedback and challenges to productive feedback discussions
- why performance and feedback discussions go awry
- how to personalize feedback and performance discussions based on the recipient
- considerations for measuring the effectiveness of your performance and feedback sessions.

This issue of *TD at Work* will give talent development professionals the tools to assist managers in providing performance feedback more effectively. It's simple: Better feedback leads to better performance.

The Importance of Feedback

According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, effective feedback "is a critical component of a successful performance management program and should be used in conjunction with setting performance goals. If effective feedback is given to employees on their progress towards their goals, employee performance will improve." Feedback can come from a variety of sources—think 360-degree assessments that include input from a manager, peers, and so forth. For the purposes of this issue of *TD at Work*, however, I'm talking about feedback from managers. While my primary audience is talent development professionals, anyone who manages staff or endeavors to do so can use the information in this issue to help understand how to provide effective feedback.

> **The closer feedback is to the execution of an activity, the more informative and helpful it is.**

The Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman observed that "expertise is learned from prolonged experience with good feedback on mistakes." Humans are creatures shaped by classical and operant conditioning. The closer feedback is to the execution of an activity, the more informative and helpful it is. This course correction, whether gradual and minutely incremental or broad and diametrically sweeping, is the architecture of how people learn and improve their skills at anything. They learn by course correcting.

Challenges to Great Performance Feedback

Although everyone may claim to have an unspoken agreement that feedback is good, how feedback looks and feels in practice is much different. Look at the systems stacked against managers: A manager who has five or 10 (or more) direct reports is responsible, at least once per year, for writing a review for each employee. And because organizations increasingly expect feedback on a regular basis, not just once a year, managers have a greater duty. This should make perfect sense—for feedback to be the most effective for improving performance, it needs to be contemporaneous with the observed behavior. Telling someone quarterly that his particular selling skill or email etiquette needs improvement is not

only unhelpful but encourages those behaviors to persist and may have even engrained them.

As Patrick Malone and Zina B. Sutch wrote in their *TD* article, "The Fear of Feedback," "Whether you are the giver or receiver, feedback strikes fear into the hearts of even the most seasoned manager." Think about a situation where a manager was formerly a peer to someone who now is her direct report or a manager and direct report who are friends outside of work. On the flipside, consider a manager and direct report who don't quite see eye to eye but need to work together. The potential bias in any of these situations makes feedback and reviews more challenging. I was fortunate to have met with Doug Stone, co-author with Sheila Heen of *Thanks for the Feedback*, and was asked to write a review of it. What struck me in the book was the prominence with which trust plays a role in the feedback cycle. Building culture is an iterative process and needs to be nurtured.

Do you know where the real unity manifests around the time of annual performance reviews? It's in the coffee bars, cafeterias, and other social gathering places in a company. Here, a solidarity is built among staff as they unify against the notion of the performance management process. On average, they hate it—but it doesn't have to be this way.

For example, I gathered data from two client sites by surveying 486 participants on how they felt about their company's performance management system. On a scale of 1-7, where 7 is highly rated, the average (mean) is 2.4, and the median is 2.7. This result doesn't even approach the level of indifference, that is, the middle of the scale.

On top of these considerations, how a manager gives feedback to her direct reports varies depending on the employees' personality, as well as team dynamics overall. Let's take a closer look.

Personalizing Performance Feedback

All too often, feedback and performance reviews comprise of boilerplate, cookie-cutter feedback to the masses, which encourages disenfranchisement in the company from the get-go. Consider, instead, whether managers implemented a modern approach where different people in different functions were treated like nondiscretionary elements of a larger collective. Within different functions in an organization, employees are undertaking different types of work, and each person within a function has disparate needs. Taken as a whole, this is what creates the overall trajectory for the firm. Why, then, would companies treat each function and person the same? They shouldn't.

Instead, the most effective way to give feedback and conduct performance reviews is to focus on the behaviors that each person engages in, look at the results, and find where the individual's personal characteristics converge with the performance of the role and function. In this way, it's possible to optimize the organization as an entity instead of simply suboptimizing all employees as a faceless collective.

Changing the Negative Performance Dynamic

The basis of the model for an organization being sentient is looking at the individual employee as an individual and his role and function within the firm. In *Wall Street & Technology*, Becca Lipman writes, "In the last few years, the idea of a sentient enterprise has taken hold—a corporation whose parts are so intimately connected they are essentially a single, very powerful entity." She continues, "A sentient organization harnesses real-time capabilities, social information, applications, and artificial intelligence to advance the overall organization."

In other words: Your organization should function as a self-aware, understanding entity. That is the reason different functions exist.

In the human body, specialized organ systems do work that no other systems can do—and they are necessary as part of an interdependent whole. The same should be true in an organization. For example, you have outwardly looking business intelligence staff who function much along the lines of the body's sensory systems, sensing the competitive environment in which the company is working. These individuals return information that the larger organization can use to formulate immediate course corrections or longer-term strategic objectives. This information is often not perfect, and it's fraught with uncertainty, but on average, it allows for better decision making than not having it at all.

In the holistic systems approach to organizational performance, if individuals—as well as discrete groups—in