Giving and receiving feedback

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Abstract

Feedback is a powerful tool that can strongly influence human relationships, behaviors and careers. Professionals who master giving feedback can become exceptional leaders and effective practitioners. This workshop is about learning to give feedback to employees, peers and clients to motivate change and improvement. It is also about learning to accept feedback as a powerful means for personal growth.

Key words: leadership, feedback, performance, motivation, labor, employee development

Why feedback?

Think back to when you first learned to play the phone-based video game "Angry Birds." The game started you on level 1 where you learned the very basic task of slinging a virtual bird from a slingshot. Many of you, like me, messed up that task at first, but with a little trial and error, you eventually learned it. Next, you slung a bird and struck a virtual pig. Along the way, the game kept giving you more difficult tasks as you learned about the qualities of the various birds, obstacles and pigs. When you succeeded, you were rewarded with a little celebration, some popup stars, and advancement to the next level. When you failed, the pigs laughed at you, and you had to repeat the level. The game used feedback to modify your performance as you mastered each, sometimes frustrating, level through hours of practice. First, you performed by slinging birds, then the game gave you consistent feedback on the outcomes of your performance.

In what other situations have you experienced consistent feedback to shape your performance? Were you an athlete, then your coach likely provided a steady flow of feedback. Were you a musician, then your teacher or conductor likely provided a wealth of feedback and tips to improve your performance. Think about it some more and you'll realize that the game itself and the experience of making music together with the band also gave you feedback that you could use to shape and improve your own performance.

What does all this have to do with practicing veterinary medicine or running a business? Everything. Performance feedback is a powerful tool for supervisors and leaders in any organization to use to shape human performance. Similarly, it is a powerful source of information that we as individuals need to continue our learning as we seek to "level up" in our professional skills.

Types of feedback

Your team members need feedback to tell them how they are doing so they can make adjustments. Technically, there are 4 possible types of performance feedback: positive feedback, redirection, ignore or negative feedback.[1]

Positive feedback. When a team member does well, tell them about it! Respond to good performance and the specific behaviors that led to the good results with positive feedback. This response motivates people, builds up their confidence, and helps them perform even better. It's a win-win that you simply must practice.

Redirection. Sometimes a team member gets off track and they need feedback to get back on. If they are not following procedure, point that out and explain why the procedure is important. Get their agreement to change. End by looking ahead and sharing your expectations for their behavior going forward.

Ignore, or choosing to not give any feedback. Think of a brand-new person learning a job; you need to give feedback on the important tasks but some of the unimportant little steps they can figure out on their own. However, silence is not golden! Don't ignore the important stuff! Choosing to not give feedback is an option, it sends a message that the person's performance on that task is unimportant. Unfortunately, many supervisors ignore team member's performance on important tasks. That's a very wrong message, one that leads to confusion and discouragement for team members.

Negative feedback. Most of us don't like to give or receive negative feedback but supervisors need to know when and how to use it. When a person knowingly breaks a rule or violates expectations, the supervisor needs to respond to head off that behavior. The negative feedback might be a simple verbal reprimand, or it might escalate to more severe consequences for repeat or serious offenses. One key point, do not give negative feedback to a person learning a new task or job, just redirect when they mess up.

Is experience the best teacher?

There is no doubt that personal experience at work is an important source of learning. Some research indicates that people learn more through experience than any other way. But, is experience always the best teacher? Sometimes we can have a negative or difficult experience, even when we're doing the right thing. In those times it's good to have another person who can help coach us through the difficult times.

Consider this scenario: a young veterinarian is working with a technician and observes the tech doing something that could be dangerous to the patient. She decides to talk with the technician with the intention of helping him to understand the problem and learn a better way to do it. Immediately, the technician blows up in anger and insists that no "wet behind the ears" vet school graduate can tell him how to do his job. The young veterinarian is shocked by this reaction and says nothing further. What might she learn from this incident? There are many possible conclusions she might draw, such as:

- That tech is a jerk; I don't want to work with him.
- I'm too new to be sharing my ideas with experienced techs, so I'll just keep my mouth shut from now on.
- Next time I'll be more forceful and insist that the tech do it my way, if I let him push me around I'll never get anywhere.

None of these conclusions are optimal; they could lead the veterinarian to avoid conflict, shut down or become overly aggressive. Instead, the vet needs to talk with this tech some more about the incident and his reaction to her feedback. She shouldn't just overlook the dangerous practice this technician

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is using or find a workaround. But, is she going to reach this conclusion from experience only and without some coaching and feedback?

The technician might also learn from this experience that he can bully this veterinarian and do exactly as he pleases. Experience, without a coach to help draw the right conclusions, can be a very bad teacher. Unfortunately, conflicts like this are too common in the workplace. Fortunately, we have the tools to correct these situations and create a better working environment, coaching and feedback.

Receiving feedback

Our technician in the preceding scenario wasn't very open to performance feedback, and he showed this through his angry reaction. Reacting negatively to performance feedback, whether through an angry outburst or politely listening and then ignoring it, has several bad effects. Bad effects of the angry outburst are obvious: strained relationships, and maybe even an invitation to go find a job somewhere else! But even polite ignoring will lead to potentially helpful feedback going unprovided in the future. Individuals who are closed to feedback don't receive it, and that can lead to a lifetime of missed learning opportunities. Instead, it's best to receive feedback graciously and accept the learning opportunities that others are generously trying to share with you. Consider these steps for graciously receiving feedback:

Step one, say thank you and express your appreciation. You should receive performance feedback as a gift. It's a gift because giving feedback can be hard and people are often reluctant to do so. Early in a work relationship, the other person doesn't know how you will react, so they feel vulnerable when attempting to give you feedback that might help.

Step two, listen actively and seek to understand. Once you open the door to receiving feedback you need listen carefully to understand it fully. If the feedback involves redirection of correction of your behavior, then your natural human tendency is to become defensive and try to justify your decisions or actions. Resist that tendency long enough to fully listen and understand.

Step three, ask clarifying questions. Part of listening and understanding is asking follow-up questions that increase clarity. "Can you tell me exactly what you mean by...?" Another excellent technique is to paraphrase so that the other person can confirm you understanding: "I'm not sure I understand, do you mean that I should improve...?"

Step four, confirm the feedback if necessary. Not all feedback is high quality; there are some people in the world who like to share their opinions about everything as a means of self-promotion or attempting to belittle or hold back others. If you get feedback, especially criticism, that you feel is wrong or not well-intentioned, you can often take steps to confirm its validity. For example, a fellow associate tells you that you are talking too much in the staff meeting. Is this good advice or is it a jealous peer attempting to stifle you? How do you know? Take an opportunity for a conversation with another staff member who also attends the meeting and ask him or her for their perspective about how much you speak up in the meeting. If the earlier feedback is confirmed, then you have a valuable insight, if it is denied, then you can put it aside.

Step five, take action. Feedback is meant to help us improve our performance. Nothing is gained if we don't take action to make change happen. This is especially true for leaders, if followers perceive that their feedback is ignored because managers don't change anything, then feedback and employee participation will quickly will dry up.

Giving great feedback with the SCORE method

There are specific techniques for giving more effective feedback.[2] Remember the SCORE acronym to give effective feedback. SCORE stands for specific, credible, on-time, relevant and ends looking ahead.

Specific and to the point. Focus your feedback on behaviors and tasks that can be named, not just general observations. For example: "You did a good job cleaning that equipment today, thanks for doing such careful work." Not just, "Good job."

Credible. Team members need to believe the feedback, be sure you understand the work enough to recognize good and bad performance. If you have computer information systems gathering feedback for employees, make sure they understand what the numbers mean. Supervisors need to interact with their team members in order to be a credible source of feedback. Get onto the production floor or out in the field with employees. Even the night shift needs to see you sometimes!

On-time and frequent. Feedback gets stale over time! Give feedback as soon as possible after you observe performance, don't wait for planned meetings like an annual review. It doesn't matter if the feedback is praise or redirection, give it as soon as possible after the observed performance.

Relevant. Give feedback on behaviors that directly affect performance. Focus on tangible items like following procedures, but don't overlook less tangible things. If keeping a positive attitude is important for your team, then give redirection when you see behaviors that reflect a negative attitude. Focus on behaviors, not the person.

End looking ahead. Always end your feedback with a look ahead. Talk with your team member about how they can do better in the future. End your redirection feedback on a positive note by coaching the person on what they can do better next time. No one can go back in time to fix poor behaviors, but looking ahead helps your team member feel like they have another chance to do better. Even praise can end looking ahead; coach your employee on how they can continue to improve on their already strong performance. Bring up other areas of knowledge that will help them to become an even stronger performer.

Conclusion

We all need feedback to more clearly understand how our performance affects other people and the results we are trying to achieve. We can greatly improve the quality of feedback we give by understanding how to use the right feedback to reinforce or modify certain behaviors. Finally, by using the SCORE method to improve specificity, credibility, timeliness, relevance and actionability of our feedback, we can help our peers and clients to dramatically improve performance.

References

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