

Emerging managers: giving and receiving feedback

Becoming a manager is often an exciting and nerve-wracking time in your career: exciting for the whole new vistas it opens up; nerve-wracking because suddenly you're responsible not just for your own work, but for that of others as well. And if you're responsible for other people's work, you need to be prepared to give feedback – both positive and negative.

Giving good feedback is an essential part of a manager's role, not only to get the best outputs, but also to motivate and develop staff. It is doubly important when dealing with a performance challenge of some sort.

But no one said it was an *easy* part of a manager's job. Fortunately, there are a few simple guidelines that can really help.

Why use feedback?

The word 'feedback' seems to have negative connotations for some people – it's seen as a euphemism for being torn off a strip. In fact, feedback has two very positive functions – motivation and development:

- **Motivation**

Every social psychologist from Maslow onwards has stressed the importance of motivation. And recognition – praise for a job well done – is a leading motivator for all of us, not just the people you manage. When you identify and recognise good work, the person at the receiving end is more likely to feel motivated, and so buoyed up to work better. (Note that the aim here is to help others work *better*, not *harder*!)

In general giving positive feedback to the people you manage is straightforward. But note that people like different kinds of recognition – even as simple as praising someone in public or in private. Make sure you give the kind of praise the person wants.

- **Development**

Everyone has room to improve and it's the job of a manager to help others to reach their full potential. Development is mostly about building on what's already done well. However, there will also be times when 'development' is needed because the person is going off track or where they are underperforming.

For many managers, particularly those new to the role, 'negative' feedback – identifying where the performance is not good – is considerably more challenging to give than praise. However, done properly, this type of feedback is not only not confrontational, it is a positive contribution to the person's development.

What is 'good' feedback?

It's all very well talking about 'good' feedback, but what is it? Quite simply, there are three elements:

- it's based on observable and observed behaviour
- it's specific to a given situation
- it's balanced in identifying what worked and what didn't

You need to use all three elements, and get them all right. Do that and you've cracked one of the key secrets of effective management. Let's take them each in turn.

- **Observable behaviour**

Good feedback focuses on what the individual actually *did*, rather than what feelings or beliefs you might believe underpins their actions. We can never know with any certainty what someone is *thinking* or *feeling*, but we can in general be sure of *behaviours* we have observed.

For example, "*You handled that unhappy customer extremely well. I was particularly impressed by the way you kept your cool under provocation.*" Or "*If you shout across the office when someone else is on the phone, we appear unprofessional as an organisation.*"

Focusing on *observable behaviour* means the recipient of your feedback is left in no doubt what it is you are pleased or unhappy about. It also keeps 'personality' out of more critical feedback. In other words, it's not the *person* you're criticising when you say an action is not good, it's the *behaviour*. Be careful when feeding back about other people's observations – for example, "*So and so said you did this.*" Make sure you give the person you're feeding back to the chance to confirm or deny what happened.

- **Specific**

Good feedback touches on an actual, concrete event or activity that happened rather than general statements. It's all very well being told, "Good job" or "Well done," but even better would be to know *exactly* what was 'good' so you can do the same or even build on it next time round.

For example, "This report is excellent. Well argued and good examples to back up your recommendations." Or "I can't put this proposal to the Board as it is. There's no indication how you've reached your figures. And the budget doesn't add up."

Specific feedback can motivate individuals to do even better or to identify areas for improvement.



- **Balanced feedback**

Good feedback can be praising or critical, and generally it's a mix of the two. It should always be *constructive*. So the final building element that goes to making good feedback is to *keep it balanced*. It's rare that someone's actions are wholly good or wholly bad. Similarly, then, your feedback is likely to consist of a balance of those things that have been done well and those that need to be improved.

For example, "I thought you ran the meeting very effectively. Your agenda provided an outline of what was to be discussed, and it was clear who was responsible for what. And you came in bang

on time. One thing I would suggest for next time is that you ask people to send out their papers before the meeting so everyone has a chance to familiarise themselves beforehand. Overall, though, very well done.” Remember, good feedback is about motivation *and* development – what went well, what could be improved for next time.

A two-way process

Good feedback is a two-way process. When giving feedback, the temptation can be to launch straight into *your* observations. And sometimes this is appropriate. However, it’s often more productive – particularly in terms of the *individual’s* development, if you begin by asking what *they* thought of their performance. “*What do you think you did well?*” and “*What do you think you could have done differently?*”

Here you’re trying to develop their ability to learn through reflection. It’s important that individuals learn to feedback accurately to themselves rather than simply relying on observations from their manager or colleagues. This is not only because other people aren’t always available to give feedback, but also because being able to give *yourself* good feedback is a key step in achieving a high level of development.

Be aware that some people find it difficult to praise themselves and will tend to focus on things that didn’t go well in their perception. If this is the case, be firm and work with them to pull out at least one or two things that went well before letting them launch into all the things they feel that didn’t work.

Receiving feedback

Being a manager doesn’t, of course, mean you won’t be receiving feedback yourself – from your own manager, from your peers, and from your staff. The way you choose to *receive* that feedback will have a direct impact on both your own learning and development, and on how willing people are to give you their observations.

As with giving good feedback, there are three key elements to good receiving:

- **Say “Thank you”**

You'll know yourself it takes effort – and courage – to give someone feedback, especially if that person is your manager. Saying, “Thank you” to the person giving you feedback serves two purposes:

- it helps to stop you going on the defensive (“Yes, but...”). Forestalling feedback – whether it's because you don't like to feel you are being 'criticised', or because you find it uncomfortable to be praised – isn't helpful, as it discourages the person giving the feedback.
- your thanks acknowledges the effort the individual has made in giving you feedback, and shows your appreciation.

- **Ask questions to clarify**

Ask questions that will help you to understand what you did and when you did it. What exactly was observed about your behaviour? How did that seem to affect others? Asking these sorts of questions can be a good way of understanding someone's interpretation of your actions. If the outcome was good, you now know what behaviour to build on. If the outcome was poor, you understand what behaviour to avoid in future.

- **Push for constructive feedback**

If someone is offering you feedback but not making suggestions about what you might do differently, ask questions that will prompt this information. *“What do you think I could do get even more people involved?” “If I gave people longer to come up with their suggestions, would that help?”* Remember that it's particularly hard to give someone negative feedback, so make it easier by showing that you are genuinely interested in improving.

Once you have received the feedback, go away and reflect on it. Do you feel it is an accurate representation of your actions? What steps do you need to take to develop as a result of the feedback?

The skill and ability to receive feedback graciously and willingness to act on it as necessary is key for all levels. As a manager, you need to model the behaviour you're looking for if you hope to get the same from your staff.

Practice makes perfect

As with any new skill, practice makes perfect. Feedback can be difficult or uncomfortable for some people at first, but as long as the guidelines for giving and receiving feedback are followed, and the motives behind any feedback are positive, you will soon start to see a change in your own behaviour and that of others as a result. Go on, give it a go!

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