

PROVIDING APPROPRIATE FEEDBACK

David E. Hartl

People, naturally, need to know how they are doing and where they stand. They need this information, feedback, pretty much on a constant basis so they can exercise positive control over their performance and achieve their goals and the goals of the organizations where they work. Leaders need to make sure that this feedback is available in ways that will permit constant personal improvement and encourage high performance. To accomplish this, leaders often must perform in two distinct roles: as a consultant or mentor to focus on continuous development, and as a manager or supervisor to focus on assuring at least satisfactory performance. There are two critical leadership feedback functions associated with these two roles:

- 1.) providing developmental feedback, as a consultant or mentor, and
- 2.) acting as a performance appraiser, as a manager or supervisor.

I believe it is possible to perform both functions even though there may be an inherent conflict between acting developmentally (when mutual trust is important) and acting as an assessor, (when judgment and fear are often, but not unavoidably, present).

Developmental feedback

The purpose of developmental feedback is to help the receiver grow, change, improve, enlarge, and expand competence. To accomplish this purpose there are some qualities to feedback that will have the effect of making it more powerfully developmental. This kind of feedback will work best when:

- It takes into account the feelings of the receiver. It is respectful of the dignity of the receiver. Its intended purpose of being used for development is unambiguously communicated. It is never used as a club for punishment; feedback is not the same as criticism.
- It is descriptive rather than evaluative. It is non-judgmental of the person even while describing characteristics of behavior and their effect on self and others that the receiver may wish to change.
- It comes as a result of an agreement to provide it as between a coach and performer. It is invited by the receiver.
- It is specific in its content and describes aspects of behavior over which the receiver has some degree of control and can make changes if they are desired.
- It is timely. It is offered sooner rather than later after the behavior which stimulated it or it is offered at the time when the receiver can most effectively use it.
- It leaves the decision about acting on the feedback with the receiver. It avoids badgering, cajoling, pressuring, and other forms of direct external manipulation of behavior.

Developmental feedback is conceived of here as being entirely supportive of the receiving person. The giver of the feedback almost has to adopt the attitude that they simply don't care whether or not the receiver of the feedback does anything with the feedback or not. They are just offering it as their honest response to what they perceived. Responsibility for any developing that comes as a result of the feedback is left strictly with the receiver.

This attitude may seem inappropriate in a work setting where the supervisor is expected to be accountable for the performance of the worker. Paradoxically, it turns out to be exactly appropriate for two important reasons: First, workers must be regarded as in control of their own performance rather than the supervisor being in control – the supervisor's role is to help the worker exercise their self-control so that the goals of the organization are achieved. Second, there is less likelihood of resistance to make self-corrections based on

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feedback when there is no attempt to take control away from the worker. The paradox is, the less you try to take control of others in order to change their behavior, the greater the chances are that they will change it for themselves based on non-controlling feedback. It is due to this paradoxical truth that consultants and mentors, even when they have no line authority at all, often can be highly effective change agents for others.

Performance Feedback

Developmental feedback is great, you say, except when you have a stake in another person's performance. Then it gets a little difficult to just act like you don't care whether or not the receiver makes any changes and you may be accountable for the results that their performance is supposed to achieve. You do care. You do see that changes are needed and must be made if goals are to be reached. And, as a manager, you will be assessed yourself on how well you handle poor performance from others. These are the conditions for the second kind of leadership feedback that I mentioned earlier.

Performance appraisal feedback deals with how well a person's performance measures up to standards that they have agreed to meet or that may reasonable be assumed should apply to their performance. Here are some qualities of performance feedback that I think will help to make it more effective.

- ⊙ It is goal-centered and based on clear performance standards. It measures the things that will advance the organization toward its goals at a high standard of performance.
- ⊙ The goals, and the performance standards associated with them, are fully understood by the people and reasonable efforts have been made to get their participation in their formulation, their ownership of them, or their "buy-in" to them.
- ⊙ When excellent performance is manifest, it is liberally acknowledged, recognized, rewarded, reinforced, and used positively as an example for others.
- ⊙ When sub-standard performance is observed, the performance feedback comes right away (not delayed for weeks or months until some arbitrary time for "performance appraisal" meetings is scheduled). The feedback **compares observed performance with agreed-upon standards. It specifies the gap between the two** and requests the receiver to describe what is going to be done to close the gap. It offers additional ideas for correction, if appropriate, and indicates the organizational support that will be provided to assure success. A follow-up feedback session is agreed upon along with a schedule for monitoring progress. The feedback and agreement for corrections are tough-minded, clear, and detailed. Consequences of inaction or non-improvement are unambiguous. Personal support for the individual is consistent and continuous.
- ⊙ Feedback for superior performance is offered in many forms including bonuses, profit sharing, pay raises, promotions, enhanced responsibilities, access to information, affiliation with organizational leaders, and so on. The lack or withholding of any of these is also feedback.

As a general rule, feedback works best when organizational leaders use much more developmental feedback and rewards than performance appraisal feedback. I like a ratio of about 10 to 1 – 10 positive interpersonal strokes for each negative bit of feedback. Make developmental feedback nearly constant and laced liberally with personal support and reinforcement.

This approach to feedback asks managers and instructors, to act more as a consultant and mentor rather than as a boss, a commanding officer, or an autocrat. It doesn't ask them to give up any of their power but, rather, to use it differently, more creatively and positively, with different stakes and different outcomes – fewer win-lose outcomes and more win-win.