

Effective Feedback

By Samantha Kornelsen
Marketing and Communications Coordinator
Resolution Skills Centre
www.resolutionsskills.ca

We've all been there. That anxious, sweaty, uncomfortable feeling that sets in every time you have to provide someone with negative feedback. Deep breath.

In my first management position, driven by a sense of accountability to my team, and challenged by the need to deliver difficult feedback in a way that is both sensitive and that would result in changed behaviour; I began to read, attend seminars and explore best practices for giving and receiving feedback.

It was immediately clear that effective feedback is critical for professional development - and there went my aspirations for a *laissez-faire* approach to feedback. Research shows that 89% of low performing employees are unclear about their supervisors' expectations and/or have insufficient support to accomplish those expectations. In spite of countless evaluation processes, policy manuals, and the best intentions, many of us are in the dark when it comes to delivering feedback.

The good news: delivering effective feedback is not complicated. And better yet, you can deliver performance feedback that leads to changes in behaviour while maintaining an intact relationship. Delivering feedback that has impact will lead to positive working conditions for everyone.

At this point it is important that I clarify what feedback is and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. Giving feedback is not the same as resolving a problem. Whenever possible, a problem solving conversation should precede giving feedback. Another thing to keep in mind: giving feedback is not a negotiation. Rather, when providing feedback, the initiator needs to either affirm or request a change in behaviour. Feedback should concern skills, abilities, or performance that the receiver can change or control. If an employee can not change the behaviour, there is no purpose in asking them to change.

The first key to delivering successful feedback is creating a solid foundation. Find out what your employees need and help them get it. Yes, it really is that simple. Do your employees know:

- what is expected
- that asking for help is a sign of maturity and responsibility (so is giving it!)

This creates a positive environment for delivering feedback. Without this in place, even the most well-intentioned employees will struggle in the workplace. Feedback should always take place in a supportive context. The recipient needs to know that you value their work and that you care about their struggles both in and out of the workplace.

Another consideration for delivering effective feedback is that behaviour is impacted most significantly by frequent, timely, and specific feedback. For example, stating "I

noticed that you arrived at 9 am on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday instead of 8:30 am” is more effective than saying, “I’ve noticed that you are always late”. Remember that it is best to provide feedback as soon as possible after an event. The longer you wait, the more difficult it is to recall the specifics.

While formal performance reviews are important and should be scheduled regularly, this is not the appropriate context to raise new concerns. Use your formal reviews to benchmark and create a record of your employee’s job performance. And create an environment where feedback is not a major event. Moreover, it is always best when informal feedback, both positive and negative, is an expected and normal part of your relationship.

In addition to providing specific feedback, it is also important to separate your re-action from the initial action. To do this, use language that is descriptive rather than evaluative. For example, instead of saying “you are very rude,” it is more effective to say, “you were speaking in a loud voice and I heard you hang up the phone”. When you give feedback, focus on describing the behaviour – what they did. Avoid labelling the behaviour and do not have a conversation about what they are. This will allow you to hold people responsible for their actions without neglecting your relationship.

It is equally important to avoid the temptation to sandwich negative feedback between two positive comments. This strategy is usually chosen to reduce defensiveness; however, a mud sandwich always tastes like mud, even when the bread is good. A more effective alternative to reduce defensiveness, is to create a supportive work environment, characterised by equality, empathy, and flexibility. This will reduce defensiveness and allow you to have a sincere conversation.

Last but certainly not least, remember that everyone needs positive feedback. This is even more necessary if we intend to provide someone with negative feedback at some point in the future. Negative feedback is more likely to be accepted if it is given in an atmosphere where positive feedback has been given often. Some experts suggest a performance feedback ratio of six positives for every negative.

The most frequent error in giving positive feedback is to be too general. Helpful positive behaviour needs to be clear and concise so that the person knows exactly what they did that was good. Do your best to minimizeatta-boys such as “good job,” as they result in reinforcing both good and mediocre behaviour. For example, when an employee who often misses deadlines, hands in a report on time, a statement such as “good work” unintentionally reinforces both the on-time and the late reports. A more effective statement would be, “I really appreciate it when you send me these reports by Thursday afternoon. It means that I can pay all of the temporary staff before the weekend. Thank you.” Each of us has the power to improve the performance of those around us by showing our appreciation.

If you’re like I was, and the thought of providing feedback causes your knees to turn to jello, I hope that in the last few minutes you’ve let out a sigh of relief. Build a solid

foundation and a supportive work environment and then (deep breath) give feedback that is specific, timely and descriptive. Remember, feedback is not a major event.