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The Art of Feedback by Alan Ovson

Make a Tough Task Easier

One of the main ways people get better at what they do is by receiving honest, specific and timely feedback. However, people often cite a lack of feedback as a reason for leaving a position. They feel alone, dissatisfied and under appreciated. Giving constructive feedback helps people do what you want them to do and makes them feel like they are part of your organization. Moreover, it gives employees a one- to-one relationship with a manager, which is a motivating factor for many employees. So why, in a survey by Dr. Gerald Graham of 1,500 employees who were asked about when, how and if they received feedback, were the results were shockingly sad:

- 58 percent seldom, if ever, received personal thanks.
- 76 percent seldom, if ever, received written thanks.
- 81 percent seldom, if ever, received public praise.

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According to most managers surveyed, poor (or no) feedback happens because education and training on feedback or mentoring is either lacking in most companies or non-existent. But think about these questions: Did you ever give feedback that made a bad situation worse? Have you ever avoided giving feedback because it was too time consuming and difficult? Do you give feedback sparingly because you are afraid the other party might take it the wrong way and create a time-consuming conflict? Have you bypassed giving someone feedback and wound up doing the job yourself ?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, think about the time, energy and opportunity you missed by not giving your employees good feedback.

Most people are not very good at giving feedback, whether it's positive or negative. Because giving feedback involves telling another person how their behaviors or actions are perceived, it's fraught with emotional traps. Can you remember how anxious you were when you received feedback from your boss? Giving feedback poorly can result in escalating a conflict, reducing motivation or even demoralizing an employee. Feedback is a source of anxiety for many people and for that reason alone, many managers avoid giving feedback and prefer to suffer with poor and unmitigated performance. Yet, if you want to get the most out of your employees and develop a healthy working relationship, you have to give good feedback more often than just at performance appraisal time.

Six Steps to Giving Great Feedback

Knowing how and when to give constructive feedback enables a manager to reduce resistance, gain cooperation and trust, and creates an employee who collaborates in both recognizing and solving problems, and becomes an ally in productivity. To that end, consider these steps:

1. **Set the tone:** Use positive and constructive feedback in every session. Know what you want to say. Resistance evaporates once you establish a reputation for being open, straightforward, positive and constructive.
2. **Ask permission:** As soon as you ask permission to give someone feedback and they agree, you've opened the conversation to a more willing recipient.
3. **Ask people for self-assessments:** This builds self- awareness and gets people involved in the feedback process, which may make it easier for both parties.
4. **Timing is everything:** Feedback is most effective when given as soon as possible after a behavior has occurred.
5. **Be specific:** Focus on specific situations and behaviors, and explain how their decisions or behaviors affect other people and the business.
6. **Limit feedback to three points:** Good managers identify key leveraging points that would make the biggest improvement in their employee's behavior and zoom in on that. If you critique everything, the employee will get overwhelmed and will not improve.

The more you give feedback, the easier it becomes. Instead of avoiding it, continue to practice with any issue that arises. Soon, giving good, positive feedback will become second nature. Also, give your employees the opportunity to give you feedback on the feedback process. There is always room for improvement, so be open to what they have to say and incorporate changes as necessary.

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