

Is 'No News Good News' for your team?

The giving and receiving of feedback is probably one of the most vital skills in management.

Why Give Feedback

People will not become great at their jobs unless they know where they are doing well, so they can keep on doing these things, and where they need to change to get a better result. For many employees it is a case of 'No news is good news', as they only get to hear if things go wrong. Have you ever worked in that type of environment? Feedback is not only key for improving and perfecting performance, but - done in a constructive way - is highly motivational.

Feedback is the breakfast of champions.

**Ken
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But how many of us hate giving feedback or think that you don't know how to give it in a way that will have any impact?

Why is it that we shy away from both giving it and receiving it?

There are a number of reasons why managers fear giving feedback. *'Who am I to judge?' 'It won't be valued', 'It will give them a chance to have a go at me.'* *'They must realise that they are doing it wrong / right'* *'When I've given feedback before, it has made no difference; I feel like I am wasting my breath.'*

One of the key reasons we shy away from it is the fear that it won't be accepted, that we will be challenged on it and put in an awkward situation. Feedback can be badly received when it's:

- Too generalised – not specific enough for effective action to be taken
- Too personal – based on the person, not the issue(s)
- Based on something which is not within their power to do anything about
- Heavily critical – without suggestions for improvement
- Focused exclusively on the past – recent changes/improvements not taken into account
- Based on hearsay and gossip – not enough facts to support the arguments
- An excuse to seek blame – rather than seeking solutions

We've also been on the other side of the feedback and know that many people are equally uneasy about receiving it. So before thinking about how to give feedback it is also worth thinking about it from the recipient's viewpoint. Why are we so reluctant to ask for feedback? Is this fear of the unknown, or that we don't want to be told what we already know? Does it make us feel exposed, vulnerable or even feel a fool? Or maybe it is lack of respect for the person giving the feedback - what do they know, who are they to judge? If we get feedback it may imply that we need to change the way we do things.

So how do we give feedback in a way that minimises the things holding us back from giving it and makes it easier for the recipient, making them more receptive to it? And how do we avoid the pitfalls and make the feedback you give is so accurate that it can't be challenged?

One way to do this is by using a very simple model: **S A I D**

Standard

When giving feedback, particularly on poor performance, it's useful to know what you are benchmarking this against. If people don't know what is expected of them, it is very easy to get defensive. So establish the standards you expect and communicate these. You may not always need to refer to these during the feedback process, but be mindful of these as you give the feedback.

Action

What is the action they performed? Emphasis is on their actions, not on your interpretation of it. So you are feeding back what you observed or heard, not on their intentions, their personality or their character. Limit the number of actions you comment on a level they can handle - far better to give feedback on one key action that they can digest and build on to make a difference, than ten things which leaves the message diluted (and invariably leaves them demotivated). Because this is based on fact it is less likely to be challenged. Link back to the standard if necessary to highlight where people have exceeded or fallen short.

Impact

What impact did their actions have on the result? This can include positive or negative impact on the end result, or on the process itself e.g. the amount of effort needed on their part to achieve the result, or the impact on others, etc. When giving praise it is so easy to say to someone 'that was really good, well done' without saying why it was good or what made the difference this time compared with previous occasions.

Development

How can they build on this for the future? Remember, the purpose of feedback is to enhance performance and motivate. So this last stage is important to determine what happens next e.g. develop to make it even better next time around, to correct a mistake or to perfect a process. Put the emphasis on what is missing rather than what is wrong - building on strengths or positives is far more likely to engender enthusiasm. Using open questions, ask the individual how they think things can be developed or built upon. This will help to gain buy in and you may be surprised by the options they suggest.

Here are the three key situations for giving feedback within the workplace.

1. When all is going well – feedback and praise.
2. Mixed performance – feedback mixed with positive and corrective action.
3. When all is not well – feedback to address under-performance.

This model works equally well in all three.

Some of you may recall something referred to as 'The Praise Sandwich.' The problems with the praise sandwich are that, in fact, it is a bad news sandwich, and usually the 'filling' (i.e. the bad news) is so thin and the 'bread' or praise element so thick and fluffy, that the key message gets completely lost. The result the person remembers the first and last part of the discussion - the praise - and not the part you want to change. The result is that nothing changes. Using the SAID model people know exactly what the issue is. But by understanding the impact it has had, and having been given as opportunity to put forward their own ideas to avoid it in future, they will still come out of it with some dignity, and you are far more likely to see something change for the better.

Feedback Blockers

If people perceive themselves to be under attack they will make attempts to protect themselves. Here are some of the reactions you may need to be prepared for:

Defensiveness

"I'm not the only one who does that"

Resistance

"There's no way I can change – why should I?"

Denial

"I'm not to blame for that"

Justification

"I can explain"

Attack

"What about them, they're not perfect"

Inward Focus

"Is this what people have been thinking about me? And all the time I thought they liked me"

Refusing to Listen

"Here we go again"

Excuses

"That wasn't my fault – I was told the wrong things"

Distrust of the Person/Process

"It's obvious – someone's got an axe to grind"

Masking True Feelings

"I'll rise above this – I don't care"

Pre-prepared Arguments

"I knew they were going to bring that up. Well, let me tell you my side ..."

Concentrating on the person behind the feedback

"I bet I know who said that"

Own the feedback - and be firm about why they need to be aware (i.e. the impact it has) and that you expect change.

'If they can argue with it – it's poor feedback'

Principles of effective feedback

Timing and planning

- Feed back as soon after the event as you can, but ensuring privacy if appropriate (praise in public, reprimand in private).
- When giving feedback based on a longer period e.g. in an appraisal situation, the more recent the example, the more impact it will have.
- Ensure the timing is appropriate for the individual to take on it board (e.g. avoid times when they are under tight time pressures, or about to start something for which they need total focus).
- What condition are you in to give feedback right now - do any of the above apply to you, or are you angry about the way they have handled something and need time to cool off.
- Consider your motives before giving feedback i.e. what do you want the end result to be?
- Be prepared for their reaction, and how you will respond.

Standard

- These should be communicated in advance and only referred to as a reminder if necessary.
- If you are not certain the person is aware of the standard, check their understanding of the expected standard before diving in with your feedback. This might highlight a need for clarification, reinforcement or training.
- If people are unaware of the standard, draw a line in the sand, but establish this as the standard moving forward.

Action

- Ask questions at each stage rather than telling. Most people will be able to identify for themselves how things have gone, especially if they know the standards in advance.
- Give feedback on successes as well as where things can be improved.
- Be prepared to build the confidence of the shrinking violet, who finds it hard to accept any praise. They may find it hard to see good in anything they do, and only see their mistakes or what went badly. Ask 'What were you pleased with, or what went well, or better than last time'?
- Focus on behaviour, not personality.
- How likely is it that the person can do anything about it?
- Could you be the source of the problem, not them?
- Take ownership - don't rely on hearsay. People will be far more receptive to what you have observed directly rather than subjective opinions from others.

- If necessary draw comparisons between what people say and what they actually do.
- Use pre determined standards or goals as a yardstick.

Impact

- Reinforce how positive actions have helped performance.
- Acknowledge people for what they are not just their accomplishments.
- Explain or ask them which actions are less effective than they might be and why.
- Link the outcomes to something they care about (e.g. the amount of effort required on their part, or how others perceive them), rather than simply what is important to you
- Check they understand the implications - if they don't know how their actions affect the business or the task they are unlikely to take on board any changes needed.

Development

- When things have gone well you may not be looking for improvements from the individual, but how can their good performance be emulated e.g. can they show others how they do it?
- Ask them to suggest a better, or alternative solution or methods.
- Focus on what is missing, rather than what is wrong - this helps performance next time.
- Ensure the outcome you want is clear.
- Check their understanding of what to do in future - if they have come up with the solution check the method, time scales, etc.

Your approach

- Be direct, don't sugar coat the message.
- Be sincere.
- Give praise where it is due.
- When it's not, make it clear that you need to see improvements or changes.
- Avoid being side tracked by any of the feedback blockers.
- Preserve the other person's self esteem.
- Deliver bad news in a non-critical way.
- Concentrate on your pitch and tone so that valuable information is not seen as a complaint, criticism, whinge or nag.

Given in a constructive way feedback can not only improve performance but can raise morale, build rapport and promote initiative. It also opens the door for your team to provide you with some feedback too.