

Feedback: The Powerful Paradox

by Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman

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How to improve feedback practices to ensure the greatest benefit for the giver and the receiver.

After analyzing the research that we and others have conducted about preferences for giving and receiving feedback, we have discovered some fascinating conclusions. These conclusions come from 2,700 respondents to a Harvard Business Review blog we wrote in early 2014. Respondents were given the opportunity to participate in an online survey which included questions about both positive and negative feedback, and attitudes about feedback experi-

ences. Over one-half of the respondents were from outside of the United States.

Feedback: More or Less?

1. The great majority of leaders were twice as likely to give positive feedback than they were to give corrective or negative feedback.
2. Virtually every employee in the organization wanted more feedback. In our survey, almost two-thirds agreed that “my performance and possibilities for success in my career would

Management practices have evolved to a small degree, but they have not kept pace with what has happened in society.

have increased substantially if I had been given more feedback.”

3. 64 percent of respondents said, “[I am] not praised or recognized too much.”

What type of feedback is most effective?

1. About half of leaders tended to avoid giving positive feedback, while the other half described themselves as comfortable giving positive feedback.
2. Recipients of feedback said they preferred receiving corrective feedback. They were evenly split on whether positive or negative feedback had

been more helpful in their career.

3. Virtually all (94 percent) feedback recipients stated that corrective feedback improves their performance when it is presented well.
4. 63 percent of recipients felt that they get substantially more positive feedback than negative feedback.
5. While 62 percent of leaders rated themselves as highly effective at providing others with honest, straightforward feedback, other research reports that 60 percent of employees say they

have not received any useful feedback in the past six months.¹

Group preferences

1. Older leaders (baby boomers) preferred giving positive feedback while their millennial counterparts preferred not to give either positive or negative feedback.
2. Women leaders preferred giving positive feedback more than their male counterparts who, on average, avoided it.
3. Male leaders disliked giving corrective feedback even more than their female counterparts.
4. Male leaders preferred receiving corrective feedback slightly more than women leaders.

Complexity of feedback

The research findings suggest that giving and receiving feedback in organizations is a complex and unpredictable process. Our intent in this paper is to turn the spotlight of solid research onto the topic, with

¹Cornerstone on Demand, Employee Report, Nov. 2012

the goal of having it shape and improve your feedback practices.

Feedback could be described as any conversation designed to convey a message that one person believes to be important for another person to hear. Yet with that as the fundamental premise driving the dialogue, there are many variables.

- Is the message being delivered primarily positive or is it corrective?
- Does presumably positive feedback sometimes cause negative outcomes?
- Does it matter if the message is delivered in a constructive, caring way, or can it be delivered coldly?
- How important is the nature of the relationship between the two individuals involved?
- Are we primarily describing interactions between managers and their direct reports, or does this encompass all conversations designed to convey an important message?

It feels as if there are a nearly infinite number of dimensions that could be considered. We believe, however, that there are some fundamental conclusions and

principles at work that could be helpful to anyone who is thinking of providing feedback to someone else.

Barriers to providing feedback

We could create a seemingly endless list of forces at work that can get in the way of feedback happening, such as:

1. A manager's personality can make it easier or harder. Those who are introverted find feedback a difficult behavior to practice.
2. Our research has shown that a manager's level of self-confidence is a strong predictor of a willingness to provide corrective feedback to a direct report.
3. Managers are afraid of making things worse. They are aware that feedback is akin to a powerful medicine in a doctor's bag of options. Many drugs have an enormous power to heal or to hurt. It all depends on how carefully they are administered.
4. Employees, especially those who are not performing well, often artfully elude any opportunity for the manager to give them corrective feedback.
5. Managers often lack the skill to pro-

vide effective feedback. This is a learned skill, not an inborn gift.

Assumptions that impact giving feedback

We asked people which method had been most helpful for them in their career. Was it receiving positive feedback or accepting corrective feedback? We found that 52.5 percent indicated that negative feedback was more helpful while the remaining 47.5 percent said that it was positive feedback. It appears the world is divided roughly in half on this issue.

Those choosing corrective feedback

This group has adopted the philosophy, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." They believe that corrective feedback is the key to success.

- 70 percent indicated that "My performance and possibilities for success in my career would have increased substantially if I had been given more feedback."
- 96 percent agreed with the statement, "Corrective feedback, if delivered appropriately, is effective at improving performance."

- These individuals were 11 times more likely to say that they preferred corrective over positive feedback.
- Many within this group viewed positive feedback as mostly fluff, not very helpful, and something the weak prefer.
- 72 percent said a leader can be most influential in their career by “Giving corrective feedback and advice when mistakes are made.”

Many people in this group have an internal fear that they may be doing something stupid that is ruining their career. They hold the belief that everyone else is aware of this issue and no one, including their manager, is willing to talk straight to them.

Those choosing positive feedback

This group feels that constantly giving others corrective feedback creates a demoralized work environment where the role of a leader is to catch people doing things wrong. Yet those who selected positive feedback are not suggesting totally abandoning any negative feedback.

- When asked what employees need most, 75 percent said “Mostly positive

feedback with some corrective suggestions.”

- 67 percent said that the best managers “deliver much more feedback, praise, and recognition than negative feedback.”

What was fascinating in our research was how much this attitude about which kind of feedback was most helpful in your career impacted people’s ability to give and receive feedback. The reality is both positive and negative feedback are absolutely essential. Each works well at different times with different people.

Most people know when they are doing something wrong. Only 12 percent of the people in our research said that they were surprised by negative or corrective feedback. There is an old Vermont farmer joke about a salesperson who is trying to get the farmer to purchase the Encyclopedia of Better Farming. The farmer looks at the salesperson and says, “I already know how to be a better farmer; it’s not the knowing I need, it’s the doing.”

This isn’t to say that corrective feedback isn’t necessary. People need to know the boundaries. They need the confirmation that what they did was incorrect. Sometimes calling attention to the issue is the catalyst needed for a change to occur. The best leaders deliver both kinds of feedback. The art is in the delivery and timing of the feedback so that it will be most effective for the recipient.

Importance of asking for feedback

Our research from over 50,000 leaders clearly shows that those leaders who ask for feedback are perceived more positively than those who simply are good at giving feedback. Obviously, the ideal is to do both. We believe that a manager can serve as an excellent role model in the process of seeking feedback. Creating a culture where one feels safe to openly share and receive feedback ideally begins with the manager taking the lead and setting the example of being eager to receive it.

Importance of giving feedback

The willingness of a manager to provide feedback to direct reports is a powerful way to increase employee engagement

and commitment. Those employees who receive the least are the least engaged. Receiving corrective feedback from a manager produces a much higher level of engagement than receiving none at all. Receiving the right kind of positive feedback has a huge impact on improving employee productivity and increasing engagement.

Feedback is the cornerstone skill underlying a number of leadership responsibilities. It is central to conducting effective performance reviews. Providing feedback is a critical ingredient of good coaching. It is absolutely necessary for the implementation of a performance management system. It is extremely helpful in inspiring and motivating high performance in the workplace.

How to give positive feedback

Not all praise and positive reinforcement is helpful. In fact, some feedback can do more harm than good. Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, has noted people basically have one of two differing mindsets. She labels these as “proving” or “improving.”

If someone has been told that they are extremely intelligent, highly creative, or an exceptional athlete, then much of their effort can be focused on preserving that image and self-concept. The person who possesses a proving mindset is less apt to take on a more difficult challenge that may bring about failure. Instead, they will repeat the behaviors and practices that succeeded in the past.

The individual with an improving mindset, on the other hand, believes that intelligence, creativity, athletic ability, and virtually any skill can be acquired. Armed with this “improving” mindset they are far more apt to take on challenging tasks and seek out opportunities to continually learn and develop.

Dweck’s research shows that parents and teachers make a mistake telling a child that they are smart or talented. That only leads them to a “proving” mindset which limits their future performance. Dweck’s research showed that a single sentence of feedback to young students who had just completed an exercise of answering 10 questions could set them off on a “prov-

ing” or “improving” trajectory. Parents are much better advised to praise a child’s hard work, tenacity, and willingness to overcome hurdles. This reinforces that they may not be effective at some skill at this moment in time, but that it is clearly attainable. It just hasn’t been attained quite yet.

The same principle applies to a senior manager telling an employee that they are highly creative or an extremely intelligent analyst. That message encourages these individuals to only take on assignments that will reinforce the way they are currently perceived. They will seek to prove that the image they have in the minds of others is a correct one and avoid anything that would jeopardize that.

If, on the other hand, the senior manager had provided positive reinforcement about the hard work exhibited (the willingness to explore differing approaches or the flexibility with which they approached the task) then that reinforces a continual desire to learn and develop and take on ever more difficult assignments. This may sound like

a small distinction, but it has huge long-term consequences.

How to give corrective feedback

Assume for a moment that a manager has a message that would be helpful for a direct report to understand. It may be observations about how this individual is going about their work. It could be a message about something they are not doing that should not be overlooked. It could be some observations about why a project is experiencing failure. The manager, because of their prior experience, can see the causes for failure which the direct report does not yet comprehend.

These are all extremely different conversations. We submit that there are some things that can be done to ensure that each of these conversations has a positive outcome, while at the same time minimizing the amount of stress or needless angst that is felt by the person on the receiving end.

Here are some suggestions that may help the process:

1. Immediately play the background

music. In a movie you invariably know how serious something is or is about to become by the background music. The giver of feedback can instantly signal whether this discussion is trivial or titanic, career threatening or merely casual observations. The background music is the expression on your face, the tone of your voice, and the words of your quick introduction. These calibrate the discussion for the receiver.

In no way are we suggesting that the giver of feedback should minimize the seriousness of a discussion if it is intended to and deserves to be serious. But we are suggesting that on those occasions when it is not something that the receiver need worry about, that you instantly make that clear. Our brains are programmed to respond one way to perceived threats and a totally different way to something that promises to be positive.

2. Make and follow a plan. Like everything else in life, things go better when

there is a plan. In the case of corrective feedback, the plan could include you calmly and objectively describing what's happened or the receiver's behavior that concerns you. Make it short. Then ask for the receiver's perspective. The second phase of the plan involves you describing how you'd like things to be going forward, or the changes you'd like to see in behavior. Zenger Folkman has developed a template for such discussions. We refer to it as the FUEL model. It is explained in detail in the book, *The Extraordinary Coach*, by Zenger and Stinnett.²

3. Don't tackle multiple topics in one discussion. Because most of us tend to put off such conversations, there is a temptation to collect several issues and to talk about them all at once. Don't do that. Stick with one or two topics. Save the others for another day.

²Zenger, John H. and Stinnett, Kathleen, *The Extraordinary Coach*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2010

4. Rehearse any serious discussion. If this intended feedback session involves a potentially delicate, emotional issue, then all the more reason to rehearse what you're going to say. That rehearsal could be with someone from HR, or it could be you sitting at your desk going through it mentally. Even mental rehearsal lets you "listen" to the words you intend to say. Frequently you'll immediately know, "There's a better way to say that," or "That won't be received very well."
5. Treat the receiver with an extra measure of respect. One of the bedrock principles of all good leadership is to treat others with respect. It is especially important to practice this when you provide someone with corrective feedback. Asking rather than telling is a mark of respect. Being calm and factual is showing respect. Not insisting that the issue be resolved this minute, but giving the other person time to digest the message and decide what to do is a further mark of respect.

Conclusions

Feedback can truly be a gift. But the gifts we enjoy the most are the ones chosen by the giver because they will benefit us and make us better. In order for feedback to have positive outcomes, it must meet that standard. The receiver needs to believe that it was done to be helpful and with the receiver's benefit in mind.

Coaching is one of the best ways to achieve this, creating greater interaction between leaders and direct reports, and thereby aligning goals and progress.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.