

Tip Sheet: Giving Effective Feedback

Do your employees seem perpetually confused about their roles and how to do their work? Providing effective feedback might be the answer. Feedback is information about the consequences of past work behavior, not necessarily guidance about future behavior. Effective feedback is an essential tool for every manager. Whether you're training employees or polishing their skills, you should provide feedback continuously.

Feedback Basics

Effective feedback says "thanks for a job well-done" or it corrects an employee who has strayed off-course.

- **Positive feedback** gives praise and confirms that the employee knows how to do the job
- **Feedback for improvement** corrects behavior and includes guidance on how to do the job

Effective feedback offers several benefits to you and your employees. It corrects errors or mistakes before they become habits. It reinforces correct behavior. And it helps employees who've met previous standards to face new challenges.

How to Give Effective Feedback

- **Focus on facts.** Giving feedback can be an emotional experience for you and the employee. By focusing on the facts, your employee will be less defensive while getting feedback and you'll be less emotional while giving it. Don't focus on personality. It's difficult to correct an employee's poor customer service attitude. But you can address specific behavior such as failing to acknowledge a customer when he approached the customer service desk. Think of yourself as a video camera when giving feedback—describe the problematic behavior in detail without adding any evaluative comments.
- **Be balanced.** Provide both positive feedback and feedback for improvement. If you give only corrective feedback, he may get frustrated, discouraged, or even quit. Provide a pat on the back as well as guidance.
- **Explain your expectations and purpose.** Let your employees know that you support their efforts to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. By sharing feedback, you'll clarify expectations and help them be more effective.
- **Involve your employees.** Receiving feedback can intimidate employees, especially new ones. Explain why it's so important to give and receive feedback. Let the employee know it's a two-way conversation. Listen to the worker's perspectives. Ask how he feels and if he agrees with you. When discussed in a positive manner, most employees will agree with you even when receiving feedback for improvement.

Tip Sheet: Giving Effective Feedback

- **Establish trust.** You can establish trust by being fair and consistent. Act with the company's best interest and your employee's best interest in mind.
- **Praise sincerely.** Only give a compliment when you truly believe your employee earns it. If you tell employees they do a great job every day, after a week or so, your positive feedback will lose its oomph. Praise will be more credible if you let them know you struggled with a similar task.
- **Don't be late.** For greatest effect, give feedback as soon as possible after the positive or negative behavior.

Key Tips

Be candid, prompt, and specific.

Employees will trust and respect you as a person if you provide honest feedback in a timely and professional manner. Remember to give detailed descriptions of the behavior in question.

Don't forget to coach.

When providing feedback for improvement, managers often forget to give clear directions on how to perform the task correctly. Don't just tell employees what they did wrong, coach them on how to perform the task correctly. If you spend most of your time reinforcing desired behavior, the need to give feedback for improvement will diminish.

Follow up on compliance.

Only your employee can decide whether to accept your feedback. If the worker repeatedly ignores your feedback, it's time to consider disciplinary action.

Specifics

Positive Feedback

When giving positive feedback, be brief and sincere. Positive feedback is the most effective form of feedback. It satisfies your employees' needs for self-esteem and self-worth. Positive feedback builds your employees' commitment to their jobs and to you. When giving positive feedback, consider the following steps:

1. **Describe the behavior.** When describing your employee's behavior, be specific on what the employee said or did. Describe the behavior you're recognizing, such as handling a customer complaint, completing a project early, or working overtime.
2. **Describe the impact of the behavior.** By describing the result, the employee can clearly see why you believe it's important. You can talk about the impact on you, the company, the department or the customer.

Tip Sheet: Giving Effective Feedback

3. **Express appreciation.** Everyone likes to hear those magic words: "Thank you." When combined with a specific description of what your employee did right, she'll be proud of herself for a job well-done.

Here are two examples of positive feedback. If you just spent the afternoon creating a new schedule, which phrase would you value most?

- "I see you made a new schedule. Thanks."
- "This new schedule you worked out gives us better coverage on our shift. We won't have to scramble when it gets busy, and that will make all our lives easier. Thanks."

Which response made you feel better about the job you did? The second example provides a clearer picture. It tells you what you did well, and the benefits of your efforts. Your employees will feel better about themselves and you, when you describe their specific efforts. You're telling them that you value their work.

Feedback for Improvement

Feedback for improvement can be challenging even for an experienced supervisor or manager. It's designed to correct substandard behavior and raise the bar for high-performing employees. You should never threaten, diminish or punish your employees with feedback. Feedback for improvement uses clear expectations to clarify desired behavior. As with positive feedback, feedback for improvement begins with the same two steps. Consider this example:

1. Describe the behavior. "When the customer got frustrated waiting for service, you told the customer, 'You'll just have to wait.' "
2. Describe the impact of the behavior. "As a result, the customer walked away angry and we lost a sale."
3. Describe the expected standard. "A better course would have been to say, 'I realize you've been waiting for service and I apologize for the inconvenience. How can I help you?' "

By describing the unacceptable actions or behavior of your employee and the effect of the behavior, you accomplish three things:

- You reduce the odds that the employee will take the feedback personally
- You correct the employee's behavior or actions (you can't change a person's attitude or personality, only behavior)
- You reinforce what is standard or acceptable behavior

Tip Sheet: Giving Effective Feedback

FAQs

I have a difficult time confronting people. How can I provide feedback for improvement without sugarcoating it?

Focus on behavior. This way, you remove personalities as a source of possible tension. Stick to the facts. Don't try to guess at your employees' motives as to why they did what they did. Simply explain how and why what they did is unacceptable. Take corrective action by reinforcing the acceptable standards. The more you give feedback, the easier it becomes.

I've been promoted and I need to coach a former peer. How do I coach a friend?

This is one of the greatest challenges for new supervisors. Many employees have a hard time adjusting to a new boss, especially when the new supervisor was once a coworker. Ideally, you should handle feedback the same way for every employee. Try to stay objective and focus on the person's performance. If you sense trouble ahead, have a heart-to-heart with your friend about your new role and what it will mean.

How do I decide when it's the right time to give my employee feedback?

When to give feedback to an employee depends on the type of feedback and the circumstances surrounding the feedback. First, determine if you're correcting behavior or giving praise. Then consider the circumstances surrounding the incident. What will have a more positive impact on the employee: giving the feedback immediately or waiting to discuss it? Let's look at some scenarios:

- Positive feedback should be given immediately, and shared with the rest of the department when possible. Sharing praise builds morale and teamwork.
- When an employee creates a safety hazard or potential threat, you must react immediately. First, correct the situation calmly and professionally. Then tactfully take the employee aside and review standards and provide feedback for improvement. Give the employee a chance to demonstrate the skills or knowledge required.
- In a moment of controversy, when ideas are conflicting or you're arguing with your employee, give everyone involved some time to cool down. Then schedule time at the end of the day to discuss the situation privately.
- When you're training an employee and he makes a mistake, correct the mistake and offer encouragement. This is routine feedback for improvement.

I don't have a lot of time to chat with employees. What happens if I don't give my employees feedback?

If you don't provide feedback to employees, they'll continue to exhibit unacceptable behavior. Eventually, this will hurt the employees, you and the entire business. Many employees quit because they don't know what's expected of them or they don't know if they're doing a good job. Withholding feedback can cause you to lose credibility with your employees. They'll feel that you don't care about them personally or about their work.