

Topic: Performance Feedback

One of the most under-rated skills in managing people – its important and a few tips on providing performance feedback

What is performance feedback?

Performance feedback is the information about performance that actually gets communicated to individuals and teams.

The role of performance feedback

Other articles in this series have focused mostly on organizational performance, but we have always emphasized the fact that organizational performance is merely the aggregate performance of individuals and teams. We have also been clear about the fact that continuing improvements in organizational performance are required for a company to remain competitive, and to continue to grow and prosper. *Bottom line:* continuing performance improvement is required and that is accomplished only through improvements in individual and team performance.

High quality feedback related to on-the-job performance is a key ingredient in the performance improvement process. Without accurate feedback about performance, individuals and teams lack an extremely valuable tool in their endeavors to cultivate new and/or better competencies and commitment – both of which lead to the accomplishment of company goals and objectives.

Accurate performance feedback, then, is an essential element of organizational performance improvement.

Accuracy

Using the definition of performance feedback suggested above, there is an initial point to be made that is extremely important. Only *accurate* feedback is valuable to the performance improvement process.

The performance feedback that exists in all companies is *all* of the performance related information that gets communicated to individuals and teams. Unfortunately, some of this feedback is inaccurate and therefore is neither high quality nor helpful information. We must determine for ourselves the percentage of inaccurate information about performance that gets communicated within our company. Then we must determine the detrimental impact of this inaccurate performance feedback and devise ways to eliminate this inaccurate and potentially harmful performance information.

The fact that some performance feedback is inaccurate is, indeed, unfortunate because people are usually eager for feedback about their performance.

The ideal situation, of course, would be one in which all of the performance related information that gets communicated to individuals and teams is accurate, valuable and contributes to the specific types of organizational performance that we desire for accomplishing company goals and objectives.

There are at least two vehicles to employ in decreasing the amount and detrimental impacts of inaccurate performance feedback. The first is to design and implement more accurate and user-friendly performance evaluation tools that are aligned with company goals and objectives. The second measure is to provide training and education to those who are charged with providing performance feedback as a part of their responsibilities. The purpose of this education and training should be to improve the evaluation and communication skills of those who provide performance feedback.

Positive and negative feedback

It seems to be very common in companies and institutions all around the world for managers, supervisors and others who have responsibility for the performance of groups and teams to shirk from providing honest feedback about performance, especially when that feedback is negative.

Providing positive feedback is much easier and pleasant, but there are at least two major problems with even that.

1. *It is not done enough.* Recognizing excellent performance is instructive because it sets it apart from the routine and people then begin to understand the standards for excellence. Catching people doing things

well and recognizing that fact also lets people know that stellar performance is valued by the company. And, it just makes people feel good (and, for the right reason).

2. *It is inflated.* Some supervisors, managers and leaders give only praise and stay away from providing negative feedback. Some even praise marginally good performance as if it were really superior. There is a quote appropriate to this situation: "He who praises everyone, praises no one." If only praise is provided and some of that is for less than praiseworthy actions, the praise becomes meaningless. To be effective positive feedback should be honest, deserved, and balanced with appropriate encouragement to do better when poor performance is observed.

It must be human nature to shy away from providing negative feedback to others. This is understandable. Giving negative feedback to others is many times perceived as confrontational and results in defensiveness – unpleasantness that most people would rather avoid. Sometimes people in the position to provide constructive performance feedback convince themselves that withholding negative feedback is a kindness to those who should receive the feedback. That is, they are sparing people from having their feelings hurt. It seems that nobody likes giving bad news to others.

The truth is that we do no favors to others by withholding negative feedback. Those who could improve their performance are deprived of information that would be valuable in that endeavor. Withholding this information may actually create a situation in which those in need of performance improvement are unaware of their performance shortcomings and, in addition, actually (and incorrectly) believe that they perform as well, or better, than others. This, in turn, creates a situation in which those with lackluster performance really do not understand why others receive better evaluations, more substantial compensation increases, and/or promotions. As a result it is almost impossible to justify differential compensation in order to reward excellent performance. [Differential compensation means providing higher rewards (sometimes, much higher) to those whose performance is excellent.] Without differential compensation (i.e., when everyone gets pretty much the same type of raises) excellent performers begin to feel there is no point in stellar performance because it is neither rewarded nor valued by the company. This is the exact opposite of the work environment that we should want to build. In order to encourage stellar individual and collective performance we must be able to identify, recognize, and reward exceptional performance.

Doing it well

Of course, there is both science and art to providing constructive feedback to others. It is important to do it correctly. Done incorrectly there will be no real benefit to people on the receiving end, and, yes, it is possible that it can be perceived as hurtful even if it is not actually intended that way. Here are two broad hints about delivering constructive feedback:

1. *Learn how to do it well.* Doing it is necessary, important, and critical in nurturing a high performance work environment, so doing it well is an important skill to cultivate. There have been volumes written on this subject – as usual, some better than others. Seek out assistance and become proficient.
2. *Be compassionate.* Ideally, the people on the receiving end of performance feedback should always believe that the feedback provider has their best interests at heart. Those receiving feedback should believe that we truly want what is best for them and their career. This type of sincere positive regard enables us to provide one another with the kind of job related feedback that leads to real performance improvement.

Conclusion

In the important endeavor of performance improvement – at both the individual and company-wide scales – accurate performance assessment and feedback is essential. Supervisors, managers and leaders are responsible for these tasks. It is also important that the culture of the company support and reinforce the importance of the kind of accurate performance feedback that can lead to the cultivation of the highest level of human potential.