The Art and Science of Effective Employee Feedback

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Businesses in the United States waste $105 billion each year dealing with poorly performing employees.

United States managers spend 14 percent of their time redoing or correcting the mistakes of others—approximately one hour every day.

(source: www.buzzle.com)

Why is it that so many managers put off giving feedback to employees—especially when that feedback is guaranteed to be useful and important to that employee's performance? The answer could be one of a hundred reasons, but most of them are just excuses to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation. As human beings, we naturally resist things that may hurt us or hurt someone else if we can help it. To use more psychological jargon, we have a strong need for "affiliation" with others, and we don't want to jeopardize our relationships. However, giving and receiving feedback is the most fundamental and essential learning tool that exists in organizations today. So we must find a way to provide feedback in a way that preserves the relationship and maximizes the learning and growth of employees.

Additionally, when we think about giving feedback, we often assume that we are only focused on "constructive" feedback, which is another way of saying someone screwed something up and they need to be told about it. Both positive and constructive feedback are required in every organization to ensure that staff is motivated and reaching their maximum potential.

First, let's examine some of the common mistakes managers make when giving feedback to employees:

1. Speaking out only when things are wrong and mistakes have been made
2. "Drive-by" praise without specifics or an honest underpinning ("Great job!"… but what was great about it?)
3. Waiting until performance or behavior is substantially below expectations before acting on it, i.e., you're at the breaking point!
4. Giving positive or negative feedback long after the event has occurred
5. Giving feedback, but attributing that feedback to someone else in the organization ("the boss told me to tell you…")
6. Giving feedback through email messages, notes or over the telephone (the phone may have to be used in some cases, but email and notes should never be used to deliver serious feedback)
7. Giving negative feedback in public (basic respect for the individual dictates that you correct behavior in the least embarrassing way)
8. Criticizing performance without giving suggestions for improvement (if you don't know how to do it better, who does?)
9. Giving constructive feedback and then not following up on the impact and the results
10. Not having regularly scheduled performance review meetings (and they should be held way more often than once or twice a year!)

(reference: Judith Lindenberger, MBA, human resources consultant)

Giving and receiving clear and constructive feedback requires courage and skill; and, as the leader of your organization, you are the role model for *both giving and receiving feedback*. If you are not practicing proactive positive

and constructive feedback regularly, the others on your team may not either. Additionally, the skillful use of feedback is essential to building good relationships with and motivating peak performance from your team!

Here are five tips on how to do it right:

1. **Be proactive**—Don't assume that performance or relationships will improve without active work on your part. Meet with employees to discuss performance and results on a monthly basis and be prepared for the meeting.

2. **Be specific**—As a leader, it is your responsibility to keep your organization running at its maximum potential. Providing specific feedback to employees is essential to success. Be as clear as possible when providing any kind of feedback and give specific examples that illustrate your points.

3. **Connect feedback to organizational goals**—Reinforce the importance of every person's contributions to the overall success of the organization; we all want to know that we are valuable to the organization and why.

4. **Have a structured approach and plan for giving feedback**—Even informal feedback should be done thoughtfully and with a purpose. Taking the time to train yourself to follow a structured approach will immensely increase the power and results of your feedback.

5. **Establish a culture where feedback is the norm**—Begin by asking for feedback from your employees about your performance. Show them that feedback doesn't have to be scary or painful, but should be embraced.

Remember to plan for every feedback meeting and be prepared to state the purpose of the meeting, the specifics of the performance or behavior, the impact this performance or behavior has on the organization, and set a plan of action for moving forward. These steps apply to all types of feedback, not just constructive.

By increasing the emphasis on all types of feedback in your organization, you will find that your team is more productive and that your organizational results are maximized. ⊡

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