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Giving Feedback

Your 10-Minute Guide to Giving Feedback That Works

Giving feedback is all about helping people be their best.

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Giving feedback is a key part of your role as a manager. Use this 10-Minute Guide to plan and structure your feedback, and to get the results you need.

Giving feedback can be painful – for you, and for your team members. It can feel more of a chore than part of an ongoing conversation about performance, and it's often sidelined or delayed until problems have escalated.

In this 10-Minute Guide, we'll outline 10 tips that will make giving feedback less painful. We'll look at how to plan your feedback, how to deliver objective comments that people can act on, and how to follow up to ensure change.

This guide offers 10 simple tips that managers can use to deliver clear, actionable feedback.

Please feel free to share it inside your organization.

Use the tips below to deliver focused, actionable feedback.

1. Focus on Change

Before giving feedback, remind yourself why you are doing this. The purpose of giving feedback is to change a situation or improve a person's performance. You won't accomplish this by being harsh or unnecessarily critical.

Instead, look at what needs to change – whether this is a situation, a behavior, or something else – and use this as a basis for your comments. This will help you keep your feedback objective and positive, and prompt your team member to think about ways to reach the desired outcome.

2. Prepare Your Comments

Be clear about what you want to say. You may not need a script, but you do need structure.

So, look over notes from previous feedback sessions and evaluation meetings, and write down everything that you want to say. Look for specific examples that illustrate the points you need to make.

Remember to stick to what you've experienced first hand – you'll quickly find yourself on shaky ground if you give feedback based on other people's views.

If you want to gather feedback from colleagues or other team members, save it for formal performance evaluations, and use it as part of a range of comments that include your own observations.

3. Be Timely

Don't leave it too long to address a problem. The sooner you do this, the more the person will be expecting it, and the easier it will be to have a detailed conversation.

Think of it this way: it's much easier to feed back about a one-hour task that hasn't been done well than it is to feed back on a whole year of failed tasks.

The exception to this is if the situation involved is highly emotional. Here, wait until everyone has calmed down before you deliver feedback. Don't risk getting worked up yourself – you might say something you regret later.

4. Make it Regular

Feedback is a process that calls for constant attention. When something needs to be said, say it, so that people know where they stand, and so that problems don't escalate.

Of course, you need to give feedback as part of the formal performance management process. But, informal feedback should be given more often – perhaps every week, or even every day, depending on the situation.

5. Consider Using SBI

Be specific with your feedback: focus on particular situations, and make sure that your comments are objective.

You can use the SBI (Situation – Behavior – Impact) Tool to help with this: talk about a specific incident, the behavior that was problematic, and the impact that it had.

This will help your team member recall a specific incident, and put your comments into context.

It's essential that you focus on providing measurable information in your feedback. Avoid words such as "bad," "never," and "always." Not only are they unlikely to be accurate, but they also weaken your case, because they're subjective.

Then, tell the person exactly what they need to improve. Again, use measurable data where you can. This will help you reach agreement about what needs to change, and how you'll monitor the change.

Set goals and make plans to monitor and evaluate progress. Use SMART goals or the GROW model to guide people along the path to change.

6. Listen

Give your team members time to digest your comments, and to respond. Ask them to provide their perspective – use phrases such as, "What is your reaction to this?" or, "Is this a fair representation of what happened?"

Listen actively to what they have to say, and encourage them to offer suggestions for improvement. This way they have an opportunity to own the solutions, and they are much more likely to follow through with them.

7. Use "I" Statements

Give the feedback from your perspective. This way, you avoid labeling the person, or prompting a defensive reaction.

For example, say, "I was frustrated that you arrived 30 minutes late for work yesterday," rather than "You were late yesterday."

8. Limit Your Focus

A feedback session should discuss no more than two issues. Any more than that, and you risk leaving your team member feeling demoralized. If you need to address a number of issues, focus only on the most important ones.

9. Balance Positive and Negative

A good rule is to start a feedback session off with a positive comment, as this puts the other person at ease. It also helps them "see" what success looks like, which can help them take the right steps next time.

That's not to say that you must always be positive. There is a place for negativity, but you'll get much more from people when your approach is positive and focused on improvement.

As long as it's not forced, it can also help to give positive feedback at the end of a feedback session. Otherwise, people can finish feeling despondent.

However, many people overdo this, and they end up sandwiching the constructive feedback between too many positives. Then, the takeaway message

becomes, "I'm doing really well," instead of, "I'm good at communicating with customers, but I need to bring my teamworking skills up to that same level."

If you need to deliver negative feedback, make sure that you do so behind closed doors, in a place where you can talk without being interrupted or overheard.

10. Follow Up

The whole purpose of giving feedback is to improve performance. You need to measure whether or not that is happening, and then make adjustments as you go.

Be sure to document your conversations, and monitor what is working and what needs to be changed.

Key Points

Feedback is a conversation. You need to know how to give it effectively, and how to listen to responses to your comments.

As with many other management responsibilities, you can plan for it, and manage it carefully to avoid misunderstandings. Above all, aim to be objective in all that you say – this will help you keep emotion out of the conversation, and focus on what needs to change.

Giving feedback may never be your favorite means of communication, but it's a powerful means of bringing about change, and, in time, it will make your workplace more harmonious and more productive.

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