

Four Types of Feedback: Using the Right Feedback Style in the Right Situation

By Mac McIntire, President, Innovative Management Group

Most employees need generous doses of reinforcing feedback in order to perform productively

Most managers have a typical feedback style. They tend to use the same approach whenever they give feedback to someone. Some styles are highly effective while other styles tend to leave “debris” after the feedback. If an employee leaves the feedback session feeling bad or negative – either toward you or about the feedback received – you know the feedback session did not go well.

The purpose of feedback is to *reinforce* good performance and appropriate behavior or to *correct* poor performance or inappropriate behavior. You give feedback to increase the value of those employees who do well or to keep poor performing employees from decreasing their value by continuing on a downward path. In other words, feedback is supposed to *build people up*, not tear them down. The intent of all feedback, both positive and negative, is to either help people stay on course or correct whatever deficiencies are keeping them from performing well. Consequently, any feedback that does not build people up or cause employees to improve their situation is not helpful. Feedback that decreases employee morale, causes ill-will, or actually leads to less productivity instead of more, is ineffective feedback. If your feedback style creates more problems than it resolves, you know you need to change your approach.

Negative Types of Feedback

There are four primary types of feedback. The first two types of feedback tend to be highly ineffective, yet they are used far too frequently by many managers. In fact, for some managers these two types of feedback are the only types they use.

Punishment is a feedback style that almost always includes some type of threat or penalty if the employee does not change his or her behavior. “*You do that one more time and I will have you out of here so fast your head will spin!*” is a punishing phrase I’ve heard used by many managers. Here are some other punishment-type statements I’ve heard: “*I’ll fire your butt for that,*” “*You break it and you’ll pay for it,*” “*You idiots quit standing around and get back to work or I’ll give you a permanent vacation,*” “*One more screw up like that and you’re history,*” or “*Don’t make me come down there!*”

Threatening to punish someone doesn’t necessarily motivate them to do what you want; it just makes them want to steer clear of you. Punishment usually causes people to become defensive, since they must shield themselves from your chastisement. If employees feel the punishment is undeserved or too severe for the infraction, some people may harbor a desire to get even or look for ways to equalize the situation. Employees hell-bent for retribution have been known to sabotage the work effort.

Criticism is another negative feedback style that is ineffective, yet also used frequently. Criticism is where you constantly harp at people for every little infraction. You look for the exceptions and point out every weakness. Of course, the reason why you do this

is because you want your employees to improve. You feel that by identifying where the employees are *not* performing well they will *want* to perform better. Unfortunately, this often is not how employees respond. The cynical, sarcastic, degrading or derogatory tone that usually accompanies criticism seldom causes people to react well to the feedback.

People who are criticized tend to go in the opposite direction from where the feedback is supposed to lead. People feel bad when they are criticized, not good. When employees are criticized they tend to react negatively and become withdrawn rather than stepping forward confidently to change their ways. Criticism tears people down; it does not build them up. It wounds their pride and takes away their dignity. It diminishes the very self-esteem the employees need in order to improve their situation.

Although there may be times when punishment and criticism might be used in giving employees feedback, the long-term effectiveness of these two feedback styles is questionable. However, there are two feedback styles that work well.

Positive Types of Feedback

The first helpful feedback style is **Advice**. Advice is where you gently offer suggestions for improvement. You present options to the employees so they can determine the best course of action to take. When you give advice you spend very little time scrutinizing the deficiency and instead focus on ways the employees can improve.

Advice is always offered in a positive tone and from an approach of how the employee can best be helped. Unlike punishment and criticism, which usually are delivered in a one-way manager-telling-the-employee-what-to-do approach, advice is given during a two-way give-and-take discussion with the employee. During the discussion various options are explored and the employee is allowed to discuss each option and choose how best to correct one's performance. Advice is simply that – advice. The employee is free to choose whether or not to accept the advice. Of course, if the advice is delivered well, and the employee is astute, he or she should respond well to the advice given.

During the normal course of the workday, particularly when employees are performing well, the feedback style you should use most is **Reinforcement**. Your primary role as a manager is to reinforce and support the day-to-day accomplishments of your employees. Reinforcement is the best way to ensure you get what you want from your employees. It lets them know you noticed what they are doing and are pleased with their efforts. It is one of the best ways to help your employees feel comfortable, confident, proud and included at work. Reinforcement signifies your employees have value. It builds them up and inspires them to do more.

Whenever your employees are in training or learning new policies, procedures or processes, they need reinforcing support or advice, not criticism or punishment. Never use criticism, punishment, sarcasm or any other demeaning behavior as a training method — it does not work. You cannot achieve a positive outcome by negative means. Everything you do and say when teaching, mentoring, or training your employees should be done in reinforcing words and tones.

Most employees need generous doses of reinforcement. Reinforcement is the fuel that keeps employees moving in the right direction. You should do everything you can to find ways to regularly and dynamically recognize and celebrate individual and team accomplishments in your work areas. The more reinforcing and supportive your work environment, the greater the odds your employees will stay focused and perform the way you want. §

Innovative Management Group has been teaching managers how to give effective feedback for over twenty years. We offer two-, four- and eight-hour training sessions in how to provide performance coaching and counseling. Sadly, there is a fifth feedback style that a majority of managers tend to use — no feedback at all. Failing to give feedback or withholding feedback from employees never works. You will never get the performance you want from your employees without giving them feedback, so if you are not adept at giving feedback you need to practice doing so. You need to perfect your reinforcing and advice giving skills so you can get what you want from your employees. IMG can help you do this.

Mac McIntire is the president of Innovative Management Group, a Las Vegas-based training and consulting firm that helps companies define their strategic focus, align their internal effort, and gain the commitment of their workforce to achieve long-term profitability and growth. If you would like more information about how we can help your company, please contact us at 702-258-8334, e-mail to mac@imglv.com, or visit us on the web at www.imglv.com.