

Learn How to Give Effective Feedback

by *Kindra Gordon*

As a supervisor or manager, do you provide regular feedback to employees to let them know if they are doing a good job or how they might improve their work productivity? Many of us may think we do, but unfortunately, feedback is often given informally and employees are more likely to be given negative feedback from supervisors instead of positive.

“Feedback is an important part of every supervisor-employee relationship. It informs employees about the quality of their performance,” says Bob Milligan, an emeritus professor from Cornell University who today works as a human resource consultant to the livestock industry.

Milligan gives this example of how lack of appropriate feedback can affect employees: Without feedback, employees become uncertain as to how they are doing and how they might improve job performance. This uncertainty is frustrating, demotivating and ultimately hinders work productivity. Employee uncertainty often results in seeking alternative employment opportunities — especially among the employees who are driven to succeed.

Conversely, when a proper feedback system is put in place to make employees aware of their job performance, uncertainty is minimized and motivation and performance are improved.

The art of giving feedback

Milligan says the first guideline for giving feedback is to recognize that feedback should be focused on the performance, not on the person.

The second important guideline is to recognize that there are three forms of feedback:

1. positive,
2. negative, and
3. redirection.

As one would expect, Milligan explains that positive feedback should be given when performance meets or exceeds the standard.

“Positive feedback should only be given to reward successful performance and to reinforce that the action or performance should be repeated,” Milligan says.

He says a common mistake made by supervisors is to use positive feedback to “be nice” in response to good intentions. But, Milligan explains that unsuccessful performance with good intentions calls for redirection feedback instead.

Redirection feedback is used when performance does not meet the standard due to something out of the employee’s control and caused by the situation or the context of the performance — such as lack of training, ineffective supervision, unpredictable circumstances, or unreasonable expectations.

“Redirection feedback allows the incorrect performance to be stopped and redirected

using training or other strategies,” Milligan says.

To give redirection feedback, he offers these tips:

- ▶ Begin with positive feedback on positive efforts and expectations met or exceeded.
- ▶ Identify what performance is not acceptable.
- ▶ Emphasize that the employee is not at fault, so it is clear this is not a reprimand.
- ▶ Discuss the required changes in the situation — skills to be learned, knowledge to be gained, behaviors changed, actions taken, resources provided, expectations adjusted, training needed — to redirect and enable future “successful” performance.

Negative feedback

Negative feedback should be used when performance does not meet expectations, and the failure to perform can only be explained by the employee’s personal characteristics and behaviors — such as lack of motivation, effort, attention to standard operating procedures (SOPs) or commitment.

Milligan also emphasizes that when negative feedback is given, it must produce sufficient consequence from the perspective of the employee to cause a change in behavior. He says a reprimand, punishment,

Create opportunities to communicate

Human resource consultant Bob Milligan suggests that holding a review session with employees for 15-30 minutes each month is less formal — and often more beneficial — than the annual performance appraisal. These sessions also create an ideal opportunity to provide appropriate positive, redirection or negative feedback. Following is an informal agenda Milligan suggests using for these monthly sessions:

Begin by asking, “What went really well in the last month?” This focuses on the positive and sets a great tone for the session.

Ask, “What could be improved?” Asking this question offers two advantages. Namely, it does not put the employee on the defensive because it does not ask, “What went wrong?”

Additionally, there should always be some form of answer or

input as there are always areas for improvement. When asked sincerely and patiently, supervisors may be amazed by what is learned and the employee engagement that results.

Discuss the specific measures of performance comparing actual performance to expectations, and set expectations for the next month. Working with the employee to develop specific performance measures and expected performance goals for each month is the heart of this monthly review system. If the goal was not met, determine what can be done to improve performance.

Discuss specific issues for the next month. Also, ask how the coaching session can be better next month. This helps make the system truly collaborative and allows for continuous improvement.

Adjourn.

demotion or removal of privileges are example consequences that may be used.

To provide negative feedback, Milligan suggests:

- ▶ Begin with positive feedback on positive efforts and expectations met or exceeded.
- ▶ Identify what performance is not acceptable.
- ▶ Emphasize that change is expected.
- ▶ Make clear that the situation did not cause the unacceptable performance, but that the employee's behavior is the issue related to unsatisfactory performance.
- ▶ Present a consequence should the poor performance not be corrected — such as absence of positive feedback, a reprimand or punishment.
- ▶ Reiterate that the goal is for the employee to be successful in producing satisfactory performance.

In situations that require negative feedback, Milligan says, “be prepared to make the consequence progressive. For instance, make it clear that repetition of the undesired behavior continues without progress toward resolving the problem will lead to more-severe consequences, perhaps even being placed on probation, which could lead to dismissal.

He also advises documenting situations when an employee does not address behavior and performance issues to support any disciplinary action and to prevent “he said-she said” standoffs down the road.

Milligan adds, “Recognize that in situations where negative feedback is given you are not being ‘the bad guy;’ rather, you are providing the employee a choice of correcting the poor performance or incurring the consequence.”

Additional guidelines

Milligan says it is always important to offer a balance of positive, redirection and negative feedback as necessary. He offers these additional tips:

- ▶ Keep feedback specific to a particular action. As an example, rather than saying, “You are doing a good job,” say, “I have looked at this year’s calves. I cannot remember a year when we had a group of newly weaned calves that are as healthy and heavy as this year’s group. The pay-off is obvious from the way you have put our new herd health program into practice.”
- ▶ Be certain that employees have a clear understanding of performance expectations so they have the opportunity to succeed.
- ▶ Provide timely feedback when the

performance is noted. Too often supervisors save up performance feedback for performance appraisals. By the time the performance appraisal rolls around, the feedback is less effective.

- ▶ Make sure feedback is genuinely sincere. Providing feedback cannot appear to be a chore. Instead, it should be viewed as a key coaching role of a supervisor.
- ▶ Develop a habit of providing positive feedback. Look for successes. Appreciative inquiry can be a useful tool — this entails asking employees what is going right, and then using their answers to provide positive feedback.

Be careful to be fair. Milligan emphasizes that the “being fair is key to supervisory success.” For instance, when you have a friendly, positive interaction with an employee who is performing poorly, what message do you think they receive? Or, when you interact with an employee who is performing above expectations while you are in a bad mood, what message do you think they receive? When performance is below expectations, it must be decided whether redirection or negative feedback is needed. Subpar performance must not be ignored. It is not fair to the business, co-workers or the employee to allow someone to fail.

