

Feedback is Critical to Improving Performance

"You're cold! Now you're getting warmer! You're HOT!" Even children playing the popular "Hot or Cold" game know that to perform well (find the hidden object) people need to be told how they're doing. Without feedback, you're walking blind. At best, you'll accidentally reach your goal. At worst, you'll wander aimlessly through the dark, never reaching your destination.

Effective and timely feedback is a critical component of a successful performance management program and should be used in conjunction with setting performance goals. If effective feedback is given to employees on their progress towards their goals, employee performance will improve. People need to know in a timely manner how they're doing, what's working, and what's not.

Feedback can come from many different sources: managers and supervisors, measurement systems, peers, and customers just to name a few. However feedback occurs, certain elements are needed to ensure its effectiveness.

Specificity
Timeliness
Manner

Specificity. Feedback works best when it relates to a specific goal. Establishing employee performance expectations and goals before work begins is the key to providing tangible, objective, and powerful feedback. Telling employees that they are doing well because they exceeded their goal by 10% is more effective than simply saying "you're doing a good job."

Timeliness. Employees should receive information about how they're doing as timely as possible. If improvement needs to be made in their performance, the sooner they find out about it the sooner they can correct the problem. If employees have reached or exceeded a goal, the sooner they receive positive feedback, the more rewarding it is to them.

Manner. Feedback should be given in a manner that will best help improve performance. Since people respond better to information presented in a positive way, feedback should be expressed in a positive manner. This is not to say that information should be sugar-coated. It must be accurate, factual, and complete. When presented, however, feedback is more effective when it reinforces what the employee did right and then identifies what needs to be done in the future. Constant criticism eventually will fall upon deaf ears.

Some kinds of feedback occur naturally while other kinds must be carefully planned and well-managed. Naturally-occurring feedback can be classified into two categories. The first type is self-evident feedback-information that employees can see for themselves as they do their work. For instance, a team of materials handlers who are given the assignment of moving ten stacks of supplies from one side of the warehouse to the other by the end of the day will know that if only one of ten stacks is moved by noon, the assignment will not be completed on time. This information is self-evident and is obtained by the employees making their own comparisons against a specific goal.

Also falling into the first category of automatic feedback is feedback gained by having a broader scope of work. The broader the scope of work that an employee has, the better the employee can determine the quality of the finished product. For example, a writer/editor assigned to write a portion of an article may have been satisfied with the section he wrote. But if he'd been responsible for the entire article, he would have seen that his section had no relation to the rest of the article and had to be rewritten.

The second category of feedback is carefully planned feedback that is designed to be given often and automatically through a measurement system. Feedback can be designed into a work process or a measurement system so that it is received automatically by the employee. For example, many work processes have been designed to provide performance measures daily, such as a production or printing process, i.e. so many copies printed per day as determined by machine count. Also, total quality and reengineering programs use extensive work process measurement methods. Employees can measure for themselves how they and their team are doing.

If effective feedback is designed into a performance management program, individual and team performance will improve, which will make your organization more effective. With effective feedback processes, employees won't be working blind and, hopefully, will reach their destinations successfully.