Managing Negative Employee Reactions to Feedback

The Importance of Understanding and Identifying Employee Reactions

Fear of how an employee will respond is one of the key reasons supervisors avoid, delay, and often completely abandon performance conversations.

Delivering performance feedback elicits a range of different employee responses. Understanding these reactions, especially negative reactions, and ways to handle them helps you be more candid and timely in providing valuable feedback.

> ## Common Employee Reactions to Constructive Performance Feedback

Listed below are negative employee responses that often arise during performance feedback delivery. You should be aware of the following reactions and handle them carefully:

* **Hostility/Resistance/Denial** — Employees do not acknowledge the issue, deny that the incidents took place, or downplay the impact of their actions; often attacking your credibility and the facts in the feedback.

* **Indifference** — Employees react to the feedback in an apathetic manner and do not fully commit to doing things differently.

* **Lack of Confidence/Self Pity** — Employees are uncertain in their abilities to succeed or take risks to grow.

* **Responsibility Skirting** — Employees may acknowledge the negative feedback but may play the 'blame game,' indirectly implying that they will not change.

* **Shock/Anger**—Employees become angry and say things impulsively or react in an emotional way.

> ## Tips to Minimize Negative Reactions

To reduce negative reactions, use precise language with sufficient examples to support the feedback. In addition, actively gauge the employee emotions and respond accordingly.

Phrase the Feedback Accurately	Ensure you use simple words and supporting examples to deliver formal and informal feedback. Poorly crafted and delivered messages can trigger feelings of self-doubt, anger, shock, or resistance.
Allow the Employee to Speak Openly and Do Not Interrupt	Let your direct report vent his/her feelings about the feedback. Make the employee feel respected by allowing him/her to share his/her true reactions and emotions with you.
Observe Signs of Emotional Reactions	Observe the employee's choice of words, tone, and facial expressions to assess the emotions and respond accordingly.
Remain Calm, Composed, and Handle the Situation with Care	If the employee acts shocked, aggressive, or defensive, maintain your composure. Be considerate yet firm with the employee, and reiterate your point with substantial examples and next steps.

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Sources: Resker, Jamie, "Three Keys to Reducing Defensive Reactions to Feedback," *Employee Performance Solutions*, http://www.employeeperformancesolutions.com/Portals/30421/docs/three%20keys.pdf (July 2008). Resker, Jamie, "10 Most Common Responses to Performance Feedback and How to Respond to Them," *Northeast Human Resources Association* (Date Unknown). Yong, Stephen, "Managing Reactions to Negative Feedback," *C-VAT* (Date Unknown).

Common Employee Reactions to Constructive Feedback and Appropriate Supervisor Responses

Employee Reaction	Sample Employee Statement	Guidelines for Supervisor Response	Sample Supervisor Response
Hostility Resistance Denial	*"I don't know what you're talking about. I provide great customer service!"* *I do not accept your feedback regarding my project management skills.* *The incident you cited did not take place."*	**Do:** ✓ Provide sufficient examples to support your feedback ✓ Gauge the employee's reasons for resistance ✓ Ask the employee to reflect on the feedback and end the discussion if the employee is being pointlessly resistant ✓ Candidly discuss the consequences if the employee does not address the development area ✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate **Don't:** ✖ Get aggravated with the employee's open hostility and resistance to your feedback ✖ Soften your feedback to alleviate the reaction ✖ Attack the employee's personality based on his/her reaction	*"Let's review the examples I gave of areas where I see an opportunity for improvement."* *"Let's give you some time to reflect on the feedback I've provided and reconnect tomorrow morning."* *"This is an opportunity for you to improve your performance. Disregarding it will continue to impact your performance feedback down the line, as well as the future opportunities available to you here at the organization."*
Indifference	*"Maybe; I'll see what I can do."* *"I can't make any promises, but I'll try."* *"Sure, whatever you say."*	**Do:** ✓ Ask the employee to reflect on the opportunities for improvement and confirm whether he/she is able to commit to them ✓ Discuss the consequences of denial if the employee does not commit to improving **Don't** ✖ Overlook the employee's indifference and non-commitment toward the feedback ✖ Lose patience with the employee ✖ Judge the employee for being apathetic	*"I'd like you to think about what we discussed and whether it's something you can put the required effort toward developing."* *"It's important to let me know if this isn't something you can make a full commitment to. If you decide it's something you can't do then that's acceptable, but then we'll need to talk about the consequences."*

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Lack of Confidence Self-Pity	*"I don't know where to start from."* *"I knew this would happen; I can never do anything correctly."*	**Do:** ✓ Give the employee time alone to regain composure, if necessary ✓ Assure the employee that improvement is possible with effort—use past examples of his/her successful development ✓ Reassure him/her that you will offer support ✓ Provide examples of small steps the employee can take toward improvement ✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate **Don't** ✗ Focus on the employee's past inability to achieve outcomes ✗ Moderate your feedback to alleviate the reaction ✗ Reflect the employee's negative attitude	*"Now that we have identified this area for development, it is an opportunity for you to improve your performance. I firmly believe you are capable of achieving this goal. I've seen you achieve similar development goals in the past, for example…"* *"You will have support from me as you work on this. For example…"* *"Let's talk about what you can do to improve in this area."*
Responsibility Skirting	*"It's not my fault…"* *"I'm sorry, but when people ask such basic questions it is very annoying."*	**Do:** ✓ Listen to the employee's reasons and situation ✓ Restate the examples ✓ Clarify that the employee will need to meet expectations and improve the development areas despite his/her reasons **Don't** ✗ Agree with the employee when he/she blames other people ✗ Change your perspective based on the reasons or excuses if they are not valid	*"I know this might be difficult for you to focus on, but the fact remains that I need you to work productively with your peers."* *"I know there have been a lot of changes recently, but I still need you to support the change and impact our overall customer service rating."*

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Shock Anger	*"This is not fair! I always knew you didn't like me, but this is unreasonable."* *"I've been working so hard to met all of my project deadlines, and this is what I get to hear?"* *"I was expecting a promotion and I think I deserve it."*	**Do:** ✓ Acknowledge the fact that the employee is not satisfied with the feedback ✓ Ask the employee for opinions and comments ✓ Restate examples, explain your perspective ✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate **Don't** ✘ Attack the employee's personality based on his/her reaction ✘ Become defensive ✘ Moderate your feedback to alleviate the reaction	*"I can see that you are upset with these results. I would like to hear your opinion."* *"If I understand correctly, you are angry because you feel that I have not given you enough challenging assignments, and that I don't have any confidence in your abilities. Is that correct?"* *"Let me explain what I think happened so you can understand my opinion. Then we can work this out together."*

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