
High Performance Feedback

The DNA Of Team Development

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Performance feedback is one of the most essential, fundamental and frequently used tools for all strong leaders, from CEOs to entry-level supervisors. This skill, when honed and polished, builds teams by building people and by helping leaders resolve issues as they arise. Yet so many leaders are not making use of this important skill as well as they could. When I ask employees about feedback, both the quantity and the quality they receive, well over 90% respond that they do not receive as much as they would like. This does not always suggest that these are poor leaders, but that virtually all leaders can improve by just providing more and better feedback. Employees crave it. They want to know how you see their work. Good feedback is so important that I've come to see it as the DNA of team development.



Employees crave feedback

DNA has been described as the molecule of life. It determines what we look and function like, everything from the color of our eyes to the way our hearts beat - it is the blueprint that instructs the development of our bodies, cell by cell. Think of the role feedback plays much the same way. Effective feedback instructs your team's development, person by person. Feedback is the DNA of healthy high performing teams.

Two Types of Feedback: Encouragement and Correction

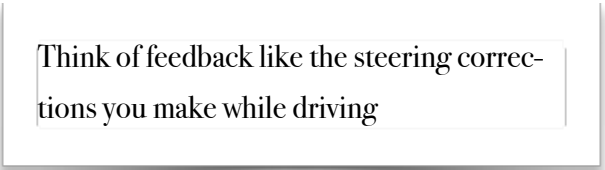
To build the best team you can you will need to provide two types of feedback: encouragements and corrections. Many leaders are more comfortable with one type than the other - some are good at correction but don't encourage as much as they should, while others encourage more naturally but don't like to correct people. To build team performance you need to be comfortable with both varieties. You provide feedback according to each individual's needs, encouraging more of what they do well and correcting them in the areas that need improvement. So effective feedback, whether you are encouraging or correcting, is specific to each person's needs and it should always be delivered in the spirit of building others up - it should always be constructive and never hurtful.

Exercise

Are you currently providing both encouragement and correction or do you have a tendency, as many leaders do, to provide more of one than the other? Which type of feedback do you need to focus on providing more of? In the coming weeks make it a priority to focus on this.

Each time you provide feedback a clearer picture of the individual's role and his or her performance should emerge – the essence of form and function. Even with the best of intentions people get off track from time to time. Your feedback keeps everyone's work on track and makes course corrections when needed.

Think about feedback like the many small steering corrections you make while driving. You don't make one big correction every half hour. If you did you would soon be in the ditch. Instead you make an almost constant series of small adjustments and this is precisely how good feedback works – it's all the small corrections and encouragements that keep work on track. So think of feedback like steering a car and you are on the right track. If you forget those small adjustments you'll soon end up in the ditch.



Think of feedback like the steering corrections you make while driving

Other forms of communication are proactive but feedback is always a responsive. You should provide feedback by responding to something someone has done or said. It is the lifeblood of performance. Poor feedback – often harsh, angry or insensitive is destructive. While you may not be providing destructive feedback, you may not yet be fully realizing the benefits of good feedback.

Feedback plays several roles in team development

Demonstrates you care

Because we spend time on the people and things that are important to us feedback sends a powerful message that your employees and their work are important to you. If you pass by someone day after day without commenting on their work, you are sending a message that it does not really matter all that much to you. Don't be surprised when they don't give it their very best effort.

When you comment specifically on someone's work you are showing them that you are paying attention – that it is important to you. And when your employees know that you are paying attention they will work harder to deliver the goods.

Helps people understand their roles and their performance more clearly

Good leaders are always trying to build focus and strip away productivity-draining distractions and here feedback plays another important role. When employees don't know where they stand with you many will begin to wonder. Even some of your high performers will wonder how they are doing when you are not telling them. So when you are not providing enough feedback and you pass by someone in the hallway without saying anything, she may read the signals all wrong. You may have just had a long night but she doesn't know this. When people are worried or distracted – even a little – they are not as focused and productive. So lots of good representative feedback will keep others aware of how you see their work and help to keep them focused. Your best employees will know you value their work and your struggling employees will know they need to shape up.

Builds skills and confidence

When you think about it, every team's performance is just a product of many individual performances. When each person contributes the team is productive. Confidence and skill are key ingredients to high performance. Each time you encourage someone by noticing something they have done well you build confidence. As you will see all good feedback includes an element of coaching, and coaching builds also confidence and newer or better skills.

Exercise

Now think for a moment about a time when you did something really well and a leader noticed and commented on it. He or she may have been a coach or a teacher or a boss. How did you feel? How did the encouraging feedback affect your confidence and motivation to do more of the same? Write about it in the space provided.

You can do this same thing for the people you lead. They have to earn it, and when they do your encouraging feedback will motivate them to work harder and reach higher.

Improves judgment

I spent many years as a senior executive in the newspaper business and there is one facet of this business that taught me an important lesson. Newspaper employees start each day with nothing but blank paper and they must turn these into a complete newspaper each evening. There are literally thousands of decisions that have to be made independently to create a newspaper. No leader could not possibly control them all even if he or she wanted to. He or she must hope people will make the right decisions on their own.

You may never run a newspaper, but whether you like it or not, there will be many times when people will have to make decisions without your input. Each time they do and you provide feedback (you tell them whether it was a good or poor decision and why) they learn more about how to make better decisions. Your feedback enhances the lessons they learn. Their judgment improves. You get fewer mistakes and a more productive team. So decisions are great opportunities for feedback.

Enables you to determine which behaviors you cannot change

Feedback also plays a powerful role in helping you distinguish between behavior you can and cannot change. My wife Sarah has a saying that applies, “People show you who they are”.

When you know you can't change someone's behavior it makes the next decision – to accept it or release the individual – easier to make. To be sure, this is a judgment call you alone can make. You will accept some unproductive behavior when the consequences are minor and there are other strengths to offset it. In other cases the consequences are more significant and the behavior is holding the team and its mission back. You must act. Knowing with confidence what you can and cannot change is the starting point and feedback unlocks the answer.

Here's how. When you uncover problem behavior you offer corrective feedback – you describe the situation, explain why it is creating problems and offer advice on how you would like the individual to change what he or she is doing, then you watch for the response. If the person is capable of change you will see lasting improvement. If however you correct the problem behavior two or three times and the person continues to relapse you will have learned that you are dealing with something you cannot change – someone is showing you who they are. This type of behavior acts a lot like a dandelion. You pull it up and it disappears for a short time but it keeps coming back. And you know that when you keep pulling a dandelion without getting the root. It grows deeper. This is the nature of this behavior; it becomes hardened and deeper if it's not dealt with. When the consequences are significant this usually means removing the individual.

Recognizing this behavior is the first step to making decisions that are right for everyone. When you fail to recognize it you can end up trying to turn individuals into people they will never be and this only leads to and problems for everyone.

Thinking out loud

Good feedback builds skills by illuminating shortfalls and strengths and it opens the door for coaching. As you watch and comment on work, you help others see where they are strong and how they could improve. You should recognize and encourage successes just as you should correct shortcomings. In each case your feedback should enable growth. When someone is falling short of expectations, feedback is the first and often the most effective tool you have to bring about a positive change.

Recently I was having a hard time helping a client understand what I meant by feedback then I arrived at a way to describe it that connected. I said, “When you're on the site, you're thinking about what you see right?” To which he responded, “Of course.” I replied, “Just start thinking out loud.”

Now you can't always think out loud as candidly or as colorfully as you might privately but this is the essence of good feedback – taking the time to help the people you lead know how you feel about their work – their strengths and the areas in which they can improve.

The first step into performance management

Because feedback illuminates the connection between expectations and performance it is essential to performance management – the starting point. Good performance management connects cause, effect and consequences from a caring heart. Through this relationship, you always try to correct problems before releasing anyone. To start applying serious consequences without first providing feedback is unfair.

The “Fishbowl Effect”

Feedback also goes a long way to determining how others react when you have to let someone go. I call this the “Fishbowl Effect.” Each time you have to fire someone it happens with everyone else watching. This is the nature of leadership. Everything you do is watched closely and has consequences for the larger team.



Because we all tend to see the world through our own experiences your employees will draw conclusions about how you treated the person who was fired based on how you treat them. These are often the decisions can build or break teams and your record of feedback becomes a key factor in how others respond.

If you have provided lots of fair and constructive feedback to everyone on the team, others are likely to believe that the person you fired also got some feedback and a chance to improve first. It's important that everyone understands that you wouldn't fire anyone without giving them a heads-up and a chance to improve. They'll accept this much more readily if they are getting lots of high quality feedback.

And the encouraging feedback you give successful employees gives them confidence. They know they are valued and they are much less likely to be unsettled by a dismissal. If, on the other hand, you have provided little or no feedback, or poor feedback, these same people may be quite shaken.

They will wonder how much opportunity you gave the individual you dismissed to improve. They will question the fairness of it and will wonder how they would be treated under similar circumstances. They may wonder if they are next in line. Even some of your most capable team members may feel insecure.

This is why every employee, not just those performing poorly, must get regular feedback, the kind that accurately represents their performance. They should get lots of encouragement when they earn it and correction when they need it. What takes place before you discharge someone is much more important than what takes place after.

A Case study

During my time as a Director of Sales I led a project in the advertising department at one of our larger newspapers to improve performance. Many employees had become complacent and unproductive. The department's performance was poor. The situation caught the attention of head office and it was my job to turn things around.

I began by introducing more and better feedback. Department leaders learned why how and when to provide it. They started working more closely with employees to help them see how they were doing: to encourage the right behaviors and correct the wrong ones. Some people responded well and others, as is always the case, responded poorly. The feedback and the closer relationships that followed it helped us determine who had earned a place on the team and who had to leave. Everyone was given an opportunity make changes where they were necessary.

A few months later, we made a clean break with those who could not or would not change on a single morning, about a dozen in all. Then we called the team together to talk about what had taken place. Even though a number of people lost their jobs that day, feedback gave those who remained confidence in their futures.

Employees always know more quickly than you about who is not performing. The people in that room knew. Provided you take the right steps and give everyone an opportunity to improve they will usually affirm your decisions. They did on that day. When they know someone is not performing and you do nothing about it, they may even begin to question your leadership.



Employees know who is not performing

We were able to stand before the team and tell them honestly that everyone had been treated fairly. They knew we spoke the truth – their experience affirmed it. They were able to move past the day without feeling threatened. We carefully recruited a group of new employees to fill out the team and the department took a big turn in the right direction. We can only hope those who moved on learned important lessons. Our focus on building good feedback skills played the critical role in the turnaround.

There is a postscript to the story. Some months later, the leadership in the department changed. The feedback we worked so hard to put in place came to an end. Relationships deteriorated and the trust we built was broken. Employees organized a union. Loyalty shifted from the company to the union. Poor leadership can damage a workplace in a hurry.

The keys to effective feedback

The right feedback builds healthy constructive relationships. It gets you involved in the right way. We all pay attention to things that are important to us, and so feedback sends the message that employees are important to you. You pay attention because you care, because it matters. Through feedback you get performance and expectations on the table and in clear light. You make it clear that each person's work is valuable. Without this culture of feedback in place, introducing stronger accountabilities and performance practices can be risky business. With feedback as such an important leadership practice, it's important to understand how to provide it.

The feedback formula: S.O.C. (Situation, Outcomes & Coaching)

The most effective feedback follows a simple and powerful formula, or pattern (S.O.C). You begin by describing the SITUATION, something specific that you observed that went well or went poorly. Then, you describe the OUTCOMES. These could be multiple. There may be outcomes (or consequences) for the employee, the project, the customer, colleagues etc. And finally, you close with COACHING. You describe what you want next time. If it was a success you'll be suggesting more of what led to it, if the feedback is corrective you'll be describing a better approach for the next time. Always include all three steps, each is important. Even when you think outcomes are obvious you should talk about them. These outcomes are often the motivation people need to build on successes and correct shortcomings. With this formula as the foundation, all effective feedback shares other important characteristics.

Frequency

Increasing the frequency of feedback is a good place for most leaders to start. Feedback should become much of what you talk about – a central part of the culture of your team – like those steering adjustments I described earlier.

Too often feedback is sporadic, catching only the biggest problems and successes. Employees wonder “Why is he talking to me? Why has she noticed now?” This kind of feedback makes peo-

Make feedback a normal part of everyone’s experience.

ple anxious and creates distractions that make it harder to focus on the message. Diminish anxiety by making feedback a normal part of everyone’s experience at work.

As you start to provide more feedback your employees will notice the change. They need time to adjust to it. You’ll help them with this if you describe what you are doing and why you are doing it. So tell them about the important roles feedback plays in their development and in the team’s success. Encourage them to help you build a culture of feedback. Frequency will give them an opportunity to get comfortable receiving it. This gives everything you say more traction.

There is one more good reason to make sure everyone is getting lots of feedback and encouragement when they have earned it. When you only focus on poor performances, as is often the case, feedback becomes a system of reprimand rather than one of development. Why would people want to participate? Feedback should be an experience they value. On many teams, feedback is restricted to an annual performance review. Because of the time between reviews and the lack of ongoing feedback, these are often highly subjective and often discouraging. They rarely give rise to lasting improvement.

Good feedback is constant and almost free flowing, like the continuous steering corrections you make while driving. These small, frequent installments form the substance for larger, more comprehensive and more informed reviews.

Like the instructions DNA provides to the body, feedback helps team members see their roles and their performance more clearly. It provides direction that enhances each employee’s performance, each part of the organizational body. Feedback only leads to more serious consequences when people refuse to accept and act on it.

Small frequent doses enable people to correct problems before habits form. Because these encounters lack the shock effect of a big review, employees can focus more on improvement. Through a series of small adjustments you can help people make big improvements over time.

When you hold periodic reviews, the foreshadowing provided by your daily feedback diminishes anxiety and makes the larger discussions more productive. The substance for your periodic reviews should always be drawn directly from the daily feedback you have provided all year long. You use it to illuminate larger themes. These reviews should only take place when you have enough feedback to work with. Without plenty of ongoing feedback there isn't going to be much to talk about. If these reviews are not taking place two to three times a year the implication is that you are not providing enough weekly feedback. Periodic reviews, in which feedback is grouped into themes and revisited becomes the second layer in a comprehensive system of performance management.

Exercise

How often are you providing feedback today? What could you change about your habits and routines to enable you to provide more?

Representative and Honest

People often ask me if they should provide two or three pieces of encouraging feedback when they talk about something that went badly – a little sugar to make the medicine easier to swallow. The best feedback is honest and accurately represents each employee's performance over time. If someone does five things well for the occasional mistake this is what your feedback should reflect. If on the other hand someone continually runs into problems, your feedback should reflect this – you get the idea.

Deal with one incident at a time. Don't mix incidents together, you'll be mixing messages. Correct when a correction is in order. When an encouragement has been earned, encourage. Over time these singular corrections and encouragements should paint an accurate picture of each person's strengths, weaknesses and place on the team.



One incident at a time

If you don't provide accurate and reflective feedback you risk creating the wrong impression and experience has taught me that as the gap between the way you see someone's performance and the way he sees it gets wider, your problems get bigger. It's much more difficult to build performance when you and the individual don't see current performance the same way. Every member of your team should understand just how you see his or her work and place on the team. Are you dealing with only one incident at a time currently?

Non-judgmental

Tripping over from performance feedback to judgment is a common mistake. Judgment intensifies emotions and is one of the fastest ways to derail feedback. You can discuss results without attacking people. Focus on the performance and not the performer. Do not voice opinions about motivations or make assumptions about character. Determining when performance is characteristic, like the dandelion, is important but voicing it is problematic. These declarations are never well received and they only serve to distract from the real issue – performance. Performance is the most important issue and it deserves your fullest attention. So it's important to separate frustrations with performance from feelings about people.

Skilled leaders understand the distinction. You will meet with a full range of emotional responses – from the satisfaction of achievement to the disappointment of failure. Treat each from a caring perspective. Leading others – sometimes people who are at the onset of a difficult period of change – requires a caring heart. There are times when feedback is the first step to bringing about a painful but necessary career change. At these times, provided you have been careful, you serve everyone's needs by removing people from work that is wrong from them. When you don't resolve these situations, you hurt the team and the individual. Effective leaders protect the esteem of the individual as they confront and remedy shortfalls in performance.

Exercise

Think of the last time you dealt with an issue that really frustrated you. Were you able to stick to performance and avoid judgement? What was the incident and what did you learn from it?

Clear, Specific and Determined

The best leaders learn to look for feedback opportunities and when they find them their responses are specific and detailed. These are the moments throughout every day that demonstrate the large and small ways people go about their work. Don't wait for earth-shaking moments; learn to see opportunities in the everyday stuff.

You can also create opportunities for feedback by scheduling time to work with employees. A status report delivered with detail and a day ahead of schedule, a salesperson's presentation of product strengths, a clerk's caring approach with a customer or supplier, an angry encounter in a hallway between two employees, an executive assistant's diplomacy in a delicate situation – all are occasions for feedback. You need to develop an eye for these opportunities and then use them as the raw material to build on strengths, introduce new skills and improve weaknesses.



Develop an eye for opportunities

The most effective feedback is caring, specific and resolute, taking a cause-and-effect approach. By illustrating the connection between what someone has done and the outcome you point out how some behavior leads to success and others to failure. When you include coaching it becomes a way to build the team by building people as they learn to overcome weaknesses and make the most of strengths.

Immediacy

Your feedback will be most effective when you provide it immediately so try not to delay. When you are too emotional to be constructive, wait until your emotions are settled but try not to wait any longer than you need to. Learning to develop an almost reflexive response to performance enhances learning. It is human nature to be more motivated while the elation of success or the sting of failure is still fresh. Immediacy connects the action with the consequences and the emotion – the high or the low. The longer you wait the more likely the emotion will have faded. The lesson may be lost.

I can attribute many of the most difficult and heartbreaking severances I've seen to feedback that was too little or too late. Early feedback can make a big difference because it corrects problems before they become habits. A few small corrections early can avert the need for big life-changing one later. And when corrective feedback fails, a career change made earlier is always easier than one that has been postponed. I've seen many people with poor work habits, dating back years or even decades who remained in the wrong jobs far too long because leaders avoided important discussions they should have held. Years later, their habits were often so deeply set that they resulted in job loss.

Correct problems before they become habits

Exercise

Are you providing feedback immediately or do you tend to put it off – maybe when it's corrective and you know it could lead to a challenging or difficult conversation? Write about a time you avoided feedback.

Dealing with responses

Many times the response to feedback is quite brief. The individual listens, accepts what you have said and does his or her best to act on it. At other times people have more to say. Always listen first. Listening sends a powerful message that you care. To listen well you must listen attentively and without interrupting.

Some people try to avoid their responsibility when feedback is corrective – it seems to be a part of our “no fault culture.” Often they try to introduce an element of guilt or forgiveness. Listen first and then ensure that the reason someone offers is genuine and reasonable – when it is not, focus the conversation right back on the outcome, the accountability and the need for change. Accountability is a great teacher. Until we take accountability for what we’ve done we’re in no position to learn. When an excuse is unreasonable, build accountability.



Build accountability

It is appropriate to acknowledge someone’s difficult circumstances or challenges, provided this does not cross over to absolving people from their responsibilities.

In most cases, feedback should be fairly brief; three to 10-minute discussions are best most of the time. Be caring, brief, specific and to the point. Only in extraordinary circumstances, such as when feedback is resisted, should a session take longer.

Exercise

How well are you doing with excuses? Are you listening intently and then testing them against what you believe is reasonable? Are you turning excuses into accountability when you should?

Always reach one of four conclusions

Each time you provide feedback you should reach one of four conclusions and each requires the right response.

1. The individual understands and accepts what is expected and is meeting or exceeding those expectations.

This is the most satisfying feedback – a time to encourage your successful employees – to recognize the work of achievers. It is important to encourage and support these people. They power teams forward and encouragement leads to more power. Make sure you affirm their contributions, underscore the reasons behind their success and tell them you appreciate their work. Help them see exactly why they are successful and encourage them to build on their talents.

2. The individual understands and accepts what is expected but is not succeeding.

This is a trigger for coaching. Your first response should be curiosity, a need to know why. Look more deeply into the reasons behind the shortfall. Schedule some fieldwork to watch these people work then diagnose and coach. Sometimes coaching will solve the problem, at other times, it will reveal a characteristic shortfall. This does not necessarily mean these people have flawed character, it may simply mean they are in the wrong work. All the coaching in the world would not make me into a capable accountant. I don't have the right characteristics – the right raw material. At times people have the characteristics but lack the motivation. When this is the case you can only accept the shortfall or make a change.

3. The individual did not understand what was expected.

Sometimes someone will declare that he or she did not know what you expected. Be careful, this can quickly turn into excuse-making. Pass the response through a test of reasonableness. Ask yourself, "Should he or she have reasonably known what I expected?" - When the answer to this question is no, as it may be at times, revisit expectations. Make sure you have a common understanding. When the answer is yes, dismiss the excuse, tell the individual why you believe he or she should have known and get back to the issue and the accountability. Don't get into a debate, your opinion is the one that matters.

4. The individual did not accept your expectations.

At times you may discover the problem is acceptance. You will, from time to time, discover people who understand what is expected but simply don't accept it. In some way they don't see it as necessary or important. They may have disagreed with your decision and passive resistance is at the root of the problem. Sometimes they just don't know how to follow. You won't always know why. Dysfunction and conflict are always the outcome. Rarely do these people openly declare their resistance, but it is evident in their efforts. In these cases you must restore the relationship or end it. Be clear about your role and theirs (it is your job to make the best decisions you can for the team and their job to accept those decisions and give each their best effort) and do what you can to help them understand why these are important to everyone. If the individual still refuses to cooperate, you must introduce consequences up to and including a discharge. At this point, feedback moves into performance practices until the problem is resolved.

Write it down

There are many times when you'll be able to change performance for the better. At other times you are picking dandelions, people will not or cannot make change. As we've seen a good system of feedback that includes periodic reviews is the best way to make this important distinction with confidence and help others see it as well.

When you are confident you can improve someone's performance, you should invest time, energy and money into the process. When you know you cannot, it's time to either accept it, managing it as best you can, or end the relationship. Not knowing the difference wastes time and energy and is a source of frustration for everyone involved. People who are well suited to their work and thriving need to be encouraged, just as those who are poorly suited and failing must also understand the need for a change. Your feedback is often the key that helps someone understand that a career change is best.

While everyone goes through periodic highs and lows, work should not be a continual source of disappointment and frustration. When it is, something is wrong. You have a responsibility to do something about it and an effective feedback system is the starting point.

Good feedback works by uncovering patterns. Recording feedback enables you to see these patterns more easily and more accurately. When you conduct periodic reviews you will call on the evidence from the weekly feedback you have provided to illustrate bigger themes. You'll revisit

the specific dates and details of each experience and use them to illustrate themes. Because these reviews are based in experience you will be able to avoid the pitfalls of more typical subjective reviews. You'll be more constructive and effective. This is why you should make every effort to record feedback.

The best systems of recording are simple and clear. I suggest a feedback diary or a log. I try as often as I can to record feedback with a simple three or four-line entry. While it sounds simple it does take some discipline but you'll be glad when the time comes for a review.

Date each entry and include a key word or title to help you identify what you were discussing quickly. A typical entry would look something like this:

January 5, 2005

Conflict with colleagues

Discussed the incident in the cafeteria with John and advised him that when he loses his temper he upsets others and that such an outburst is unacceptable in a culture like ours that demands we treat everyone respectfully. I advised him to control his emotions or step away from situations before he gets to this point.

This two-pronged approach to performance (recorded feedback with periodic reviews) works because it provides the information people need to know clearly what is expected, the extent to which they are exceeding meeting or falling short of your expectations and because it opens the door for coaching. And you develop the knowledge you need to clearly distinguish between performance you can and cannot change. This is much more difficult if feedback is not formally recorded.

The success of all teams rests largely on the way individual roles are defined and performed. After all, the work of a team of 500 is really the sum total of how well each member understands and performs his or her specific role. Feedback is the DNA of this individual development - a comprehensive system is essential to a healthy and high performing team.

Exercise

Over the coming months which facets of high performance feedback will you focus on most for improvement?

Exercise

In the space provided below record the next five times you provide feedback. This could be encouraging or corrective feedback. Remember to include a description of what happened (The situation) the outcomes and finally the coaching you provided.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4.-----

5.-----

