

Three Keys to Effective Feedback

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Managers who spend a lot of time developing specific what-if scenarios about their businesses and who examine business data with the intense rigor of a scientist often use no such specifics or data when evaluating the company's most important capital: employee performance. But effective feedback requires using the same attention to detail that is used when analyzing business information.

Creating and delivering a specific message based on observed performance is key to effective feedback. You may have told a fellow manager, a co-worker, or even your boss that he is a good leader, that she communicates well, or that he needs to be more strategic. You may believe such statements are helpful feedback. But they only evaluate or interpret; they don't describe specific behavior so a person can learn and develop by repeating or avoiding that behavior.

Effective feedback should enable the receiver to walk away understanding exactly what he or she did and what impact it had on you. When the result is this specific and this direct, there is a better chance that the person getting the feedback will be motivated to begin, continue, or stop behaviors that affect performance.

Think about statements you might have made to co-workers, bosses, or subordinates about their performance. Then ask yourself: What did the person do that made you think he was a good leader? What did she say and how did she say it to make you think she communicates well? What did he do that made you conclude his thinking wasn't strategic enough?

There are a number of common mistakes that people make when giving feedback. Among them are delivering feedback that is framed in judgmental terms, that is too vague, that goes on ad nauseam, or that contains an implied threat or inappropriate humor.

You can avoid common feedback mistakes by learning how to communicate important information about performance to subordinates,

peers, or superiors in a way that helps them identify ways in which they can improve. During the course of giving feedback to tens of thousands of people over many years, the Center for Creative Leadership has developed a feedback technique called situation-behavior-impact, or SBI. Using this technique, you can deliver feedback that replaces personal attack, incorrect judgments, vague statements, and third-party slights with direct and objective comments on a person's actions. Hearing this kind of feedback, the recipient can more easily see what actions to take to continue and improve performance or change behavior that is ineffective or an obstacle to performance.

The SBI technique is effective because it's simple. When giving feedback you describe the situation, describe the behavior you observed, and explain the impact the behavior had on you. The following is a look at how to use each component to the SBI approach.

Capture the Situation

The first step in giving effective feedback is to capture and clarify the specific situation in which the behavior occurred. If you say, "On Tuesday, in the break room with Carol and Fred," rather than, "A couple of days ago at the office with some people," you avoid the vague comments and exaggerations that torpedo so many feedback opportunities. Describing the location and time of a behavior creates context for your feedback recipients, helping them remember clearly their thinking and behavior at the time.

Capturing the situation is only the start of your feedback session. Here are a few examples of how you might successfully describe a situation when giving feedback.

Yesterday morning, while we were inspecting the plant...

Last Monday, after lunch, while we were walking with Cindy to the meeting...

Today, first thing this morning, when you and I were talking at the coffee machine...

Specificity is important when recalling a situation. The more specifics and details you can use in bringing the situation to mind, the clearer your message will be.

Describe the Behavior

Describing the behavior is the second step to giving effective feedback. It's also the most crucial step and the one that is most often omitted – probably because behavior can be difficult to identify and describe. The most common mistake in giving feedback is communicating judgments by using adjectives that describe the person but not the person's actions. That kind of feedback is ineffective because it doesn't give the receiver information about what behavior to stop or to consider in order to improve performance. Consider these statements:

He was rude during the meeting.
She seemed bored at her team's presentation.
He seemed pleased with the report his employees presented.

These statements describe an observer's impression or interpretation of a behavior. Now consider the following actions an observer might witness that could lead to those impressions and interpretations.

He spoke at the same time another person was speaking. (*Rude*)
She yawned, rolled her eyes, and looked out the window. (*Bored*)
He smiled and nodded his head. (*Pleased*)

The statements in this list describe the actions that led to the impressions and interpretations in the first set of statements. The focus is on the actual behavior, not on what the behavior might mean. By using the details of observed action to describe behavior, you avoid the mistake of judging behavior. By focusing on the action, not the impression, you can communicate clear facts that a person can understand and act on.

To become more adept at identifying behavior and effectively communicating what you have seen to the feedback recipient, you need to capture

not only *what* people do but *how* they do it. The new CEO who stands before her company and says, "I'm excited to be your new president," will appear insincere if she has no expression on her face, speaks in a flat voice, and uses no hand gestures. When giving people feedback using SBI, it is important to capture not only *what* is said or done but also *how* it is said and done. You can capture the *how* by paying attention to three things: body language, tone of voice and speaking manner, and word choice.

Body Language

Body language is nonverbal communication and can include facial expressions, eye movement, body posture, and hand gestures. For example:

Jim was becoming increasingly irritated with Alice during their meeting. Alice frequently shook her foot, shifted in her seat numerous times, tapped her pen on the table repeatedly, and nodded her head at people as they passed by her cubicle while he was talking.

Jim has communicated the *situation* and some clear instances of *behavior* to Alice. His approach will help Alice understand the impact of her behavior.

Although Alice never spoke, she sent loud and clear messages through her body language. Jim can begin to give Alice effective feedback by saying something like this:

"Alice, during our meeting yesterday in your cubicle I noticed that you looked at your watch several times during a fifteen-minute period. You tapped your pencil loudly on the table and shifted from side to side in your seat. You also nodded your head at people as they passed by your cubicle while I was speaking."

Jim has communicated the *situation* and some clear instances of *behavior* to Alice. His approach will help Alice understand the impact of her behavior.

Tone of Voice and Speaking Manner

Tone of voice and speaking manner relate to the pitch of a person's voice, the speed and volume at which the person speaks, and the pauses used. Voice mannerisms can be hard to notice and describe for the purpose of giving effective feedback, but can be useful behavioral cues. For example:

Jason is introducing a new product idea to a group of his peers. During his presentation he pauses on at least six different occasions, halting in mid-sentence. After these pauses his voice slows down considerably. He speaks in a low monotone. When people ask him questions, he suddenly speaks very fast. He ends his talk by saying, "Thank you, thank you very much," in a tone that is louder than he has used throughout the whole speech.

Jason probably created the impression that he was uncertain, nervous, and hesitant. But to say just that to him won't help him develop. Effective feedback can include a description of Jason's speaking manner. It can talk about *how* he presented the material – the pauses and the tone and volume of his voice:

"Jason, during your presentation yesterday you stopped several times and spoke so low that it was difficult for me to hear you. Then toward the end of your presentation, when people asked questions, you spoke faster and your voice got louder. The way you presented made me feel that you weren't prepared or that you didn't care much about your presentation, and the way you spoke faster at the end made me feel that you were in a rush to get out of the room."

Word Choice

A person's choice of words often can be the least important component of behavior. Nevertheless, capturing the specific language a person uses during a specific situation can help you give effective feedback.

During a face-to-face team meeting with a small development group, Bob loses his temper when he learns that Fred will miss a deadline. Bob calls Fred a loser in front of the entire group. When the meeting breaks up, the team members quietly file out without speaking to one another.

If the context of a person's message has an impact on you and you want to give effective feedback, write down the speaker's words so you can remember exactly what was said:

"Bob, during the team meeting this morning you called Fred a 'loser' in front of the whole group. I was really uncomfortable that you singled out one person and used that kind of insult. After hearing that, I felt that we weren't a team at all."

Deliver the Impact

The final step in giving effective feedback is to relay the impact that the other person's behavior had on you. The impact you want to communicate is not how you think a person's behavior might affect the organization, co-workers, a program, clients, a product, or any other third party. The impact you want to focus on and communicate is *your* reaction to a behavior. There are two directions you can take when sharing the impact of a person's behavior.

- You can evaluate or make a judgment about the person's behavior: "*I thought you showed interest when you asked for the group's opinions.*" This tactic is the most common but also the less effective than the first because it truly is your reaction to someone's behavior, a reaction that only you experience. The person hearing your feedback can't easily dismiss your personal experience, so she is more likely to hear what you've said.

- You can acknowledge the emotional effect the person's behavior had on you: "*When you told me in the meeting that my concerns about product development were 'overblown', I felt belittled.*" This approach can be more effective than the first because it truly is your reaction to someone's behavior, a reaction that only you

experience. The person hearing your feedback can't easily dismiss your personal experience, so she is more likely to hear what you've said.

By communicating the personal impact a behavior has had on you, you are sharing a point of view and asking the other person to view that behavior from your perspective. That kind of sharing helps to build trust, which in turn can lead to even more effective feedback as communication is improved.

To develop your effectiveness in carrying out the impact stage of giving feedback, practice putting your feedback in these forms: When you did [behavior], I felt [impact]. When you said [behavior], I was [impact].

Here are some examples of how you might use these forms when giving feedback:

- *Peer feedback*. "Sophie, this morning in the hallway you asked for my opinion about decisions to launch our new product. You also often ask me to join the group at lunch. *That makes me feel included, part of the team.*"
- *Subordinate feedback*. "Matt, in the meeting with the new vice-president yesterday, you kept your voice at an even tone, even when she questioned your numbers. You held out your hand with your palm up several times. *I felt really at ease with your delivery.*"
- *Boss feedback*. "Karen, you have not commented once about the field reports I have completed. *I feel slighted.*"

Putting It All Together

Review the situation, behavior, and impact steps that build effective feedback, and practice them at every opportunity. You don't have to wait for a feedback situation to arise to review your skills. For example, the next time you attend a trade show and hear a compelling presentation, think about what you are experiencing that makes the presentation so valuable. Observe the speaker and take note of the situation, the speaker's behavior, and the impact that behavior is having on you. Is

the speaker using hand gestures? What about tone of voice? What kinds of facial expressions is the speaker making? Are the speaker's words appropriate for the audience and the subject?

Take time to reflect on your feedback efforts. Ask yourself, What did I pay attention to this particular behavior? What does this say about me? Perhaps you have observed behaviors that you want to develop in yourself or that you want to drop or guard against. Reflection also gives you time to understand the true nature of the impact the behavior had on you. Ask yourself, How did I feel when she talked to me in that tone of voice? What emotional response did I have when he shook my hand and said my reports showed good research an attention to detail? Reflection will help you become more concise and focused in delivering your feedback message and help you avoid traps that weaken your message.

As you become more familiar with the SBI approach and more comfortable with the delivery, your feedback skills will become increasingly effective. The people you work with – your boss, colleagues, and subordinates will benefit from developing a useful skill that not only helps to raise productivity of all the people around you but also bolsters your personal leadership skills.

Suggested Reading

- Buron, R.J., and McDonald-Mann D. *Giving Feedback to Subordinates*. Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership, 1999.
- Kirkland, K., and Manoogian, S. *Ongoing Feedback: How to Get It, How to Use It*. Greensboro, N.C., Center for Creative Leadership, 1998.
- Stone, D., Patton, B., and Heen, S. *Difficult Conversations*. New York: Viking, 1999.

This article is adapted from *Feedback That Works: How to Build and Deliver Your Message*, a CCL Ideas Into Action Guidebook that helps managers develop the skills to give meaningful and effective feedback. For more information, call 336/545-2810 or visit our Web site, at www.ccl.org.
