EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK SKILLS
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In any training or coaching situation, the quality and number of interactions between managers and their employees/trainees depend on how well and how often the two communicate. To improve their effectiveness as trainers or coaches, supervisors, and managers must hone their ability to give and receive feedback.

The keys to successful feedback are to focus positively rather than negatively on performance and remember that the primary purpose of feedback is to help improve performance.

The Feedback Process

Like many other effective skills, performance feedback can be best accomplished when a standardized process is followed. Here is a simple six-step technique which, when practiced, can increase the likelihood of success in giving feedback to employees.

Step 1. ***State what you observed.*** Do so by providing specific examples of observed performance or failure to perform. This reduces the possibility of the employee feeling you are being unfair and/or arguing with you.

Example: "Jean, you got eight out of twenty answers correct on your proficiency examination yesterday."

Step 2. ***Describe your feelings about the performance.*** This will allow personal feedback to the employee while focusing attention away from the incorrect performance and potentially reducing defensiveness.

Example: "I feel that the reason you did not get 100 percent on the examination is that, because of overtime, you didn't have adequate time to study."

Step 3. ***Explain the impact of their performance.*** Many times, employees do not fully understand the impact of their actions or inactions. By reminding them of potential impact, you may be able to refocus or redirect them.

Example: "By not achieving 100 percent on the examination, you have identified some areas in which review or remedial training is needed. As you know, our union contract states that you cannot move into the next phase of training until you pass all examinations with 100 percent."

Step 4. ***Solicit understanding, agreement, and/or commitment.*** Employees will not generally correct performance or progress until they agree that a change or improvement is needed. Before going further in the feedback process, a manager/coach should obtain an acknowledgement of need and/or agreement to change, otherwise there may be resistance and time wasted.

Example: "Jean, before going further let's discuss your understanding of the need for successfully passing the examination. Then we can talk about what we can do to help improve your knowledge or increase proficiency so that you can pass the exam and move to the next phase of training? How does that sound to you?"

Step 5. ***Make suggestions for improvement, if necessary.*** Once commitment to change has been obtained, if it becomes obvious that the trainee has misunderstood materials or task procedures, you may need to offer suggestions or even demonstrate a task. Do not give the employee all the answers. Instead, provide tools and guide their learning.

Example: "Jean, you seem unsure of how to properly review material for the examination. What do you think of pairing up with one or more of your peers to form a study group?"

Step 6. ***Reinforce support for the trainee.*** Even though an employee may not be totally successful in completion of a task or assignment, it is important that they know you are a resource and still value them.

Example: "I am sure that once you have had a chance to review the material again and complete the practice exercises that you will get all the questions right on the re-examination.

Please feel free to let me know if your need additional assistance or have questions."

Verbal Feedback

Here are some tips for providing feedback verbally:

Provide positive feedback; Not just criticism. By anticipating lapses in employee performance, especially early in their learning cycle, managers can provide support and guidance without setting up an adversarial relationship or causing lowered employee self-esteem. Too often, trainers or coaches get so concerned with their employees winning or attaining complete success, which they fail to recognize small or partial accomplishments. This is counterproductive and can create a barrier between the manager and employees.

It is important for managers to remember that the focus should not be on the employee's failure(s), but on their successes.

Example: "You got eight out of ten questions correct." This language projects a positive message as opposed to the following: “You got two questions wrong." Notice that this negative language ignores the successes of the employee.

Praise in public; Criticize in private. When providing praise for employees, managers can do so with a simple verbal acknowledgement of success or through a more tangible

means, such as an award or reward. On the other hand, criticism should be done in privacy and in a low-key manner in order to avoid the possibility of embarrassing an employee or creating resentment or defensiveness.

Generally, most people appreciate public recognition of their accomplishments. However, managers should remember that as the workforce becomes more diverse, they are likely to encounter a variety of cultural differences in the training environment. These differences require different approaches to coaching employees. For example, in some cultures, people are taught to be humble and not seek public recognition for accomplishments. For that reason, public praise may not be appropriate in some instances.

Stick to key performance issues. One of the biggest mistakes managers make in providing feedback is to focus on the employee rather than on their behavior. Whenever a verbal attack is made on an employee they are likely to ignore the feedback, become defensive and/or retaliate. For example, if an employee were to inappropriately perform part of a task following instruction during training, the tendency might be to say, "What's wrong with you? I've told you how to perform the task and have even demonstrated it. Why can't you get it completely right?"

This type of language is not only accusatory, or verbal finger pointing at the employee, but also likely to hurt the employee's feelings or irritate them. Instead, a more appropriate approach might be, "Congratulations, you were able to accomplish part of the task this time. Tell me your understanding of how the task is supposed to be performed." In this example, praise is given for partial success, then an effort made to discover why the remainder of the task was not successfully accomplished. Once the cause is found, the manager should re-address or instruct, re-demonstrate, then have the person attempt the task again.

Give specific examples instead of general statements. Telling an employee that they did a "pretty good job" in performing a task, does not let them know what was good about their performance.

While it may give them a warm, fuzzy feeling inside, it will not guarantee a repeat of the behavior in the future. Another approach might be, "You performed that task well Sue. I particularly like the way you did _____ in step two of the process. By doing that, you were able to more effectively and efficiently complete the entire task within the allotted time frame. Keep using that technique."

This type of specific feedback reinforces the need for the employee to repeat certain effective actions in the future.

Be consistent when giving feedback. To help improve the performance of employees and enhance their own ability to provide consistently valuable feedback, managers should give feedback in a standard manner each time. The feedback process outlined earlier is one way to accomplish this.

Nonverbal Feedback

In addition to verbally communicating with employees, managers actively provide feedback through a variety of non-verbal means. Each of these has the potential
In addition to verbally communicating with employees, managers actively provide feedback through a variety of non-verbal means. Each of these has the potential for conveying a number of meanings, therefore, managers should always be conscious of their potential message. By watching the reaction of employees, managers may be able to reduce misunderstandings.

Some of the ways nonverbal messages are sent to employees are:

Vocally. The placement of inflection on certain words, volume, rate of delivery, and tone of voice all have the potential for making a message sound either positive or negative. By practicing verbal delivery technique and audio or videotaping performance, managers can hear or see what their employees do. Necessary style changes can then be made.

Through appearance. Within three minutes of contact with employees/trainees, an assessment is made of the presenter and their delivery style. To help ensure that the assessment is positive, managers should work toward consciously presenting a professional and polished image.

By smiling. Unlike other non-verbal cues, the smile is universally understood by most people to mean that its sender is open, friendly, agreeable, welcomes input, and is approachable. This last point could mean success or failure with employees.

With body language/gestures. There are so many possible messages that can be sent through body language, which they could take up this entire article. A key point to remember regarding body language and gestures is that different cultural groups or individuals may assign a variety of meanings to movements. Being conscious of this fact and watching employee reactions to nonverbal signals could prevent problems during training and communication.

Through eye contact. At regular intervals managers should make eye contact with every employee present in group presentations and when working one-on-one with a trainee. By doing this, credibility is potentially increased, resistance to what is being said can be lowered, attention can be gained and held easier, rapport developed, and participation encouraged.

Feedback is not difficult, but it is a skill. Like any other skill it takes practice to master, but once mastered, managers have a powerful tool for sharing knowledge and facilitating knowledge skill enhancement.

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