

Management Toolkit: Guidelines for Giving Developmental Feedback

Why is feedback important?

Feedback is the most important tool in a manager's arsenal to support their staff's continued professional development. By giving your staff constructive and actionable feedback on a regular basis, staff knows that you support them in doing their best work and are a resource for their development. When feedback is given from a place of generosity and caring, it is an important sign that you are investing in their success. The more you give timely, constructive feedback, the greater that investment will pay off in staff developing the competencies necessary to be successful. Change doesn't typically happen after one comment or suggestion, so the continued feedback is critical to develop the new skills.

To support managers in this effort, we've created the following tools:

- [Guidelines for Receiving Feedback Constructively](#)
- [Feedback Form \(Used to establish a healthy working relationships\)](#)
- [Feedback Planning Worksheet](#)

The best way to master the art of feedback is to do it often and regularly. Remember the golden rule of performance appraisals of **no surprises**. Staff should never hear anything in their review that they have not heard before. The appraisal is the official summary of feedback you have been giving to staff *throughout* the year, not new information you want to share.

Defining constructive feedback:

Performance feedback can be given two ways: through constructive feedback or through praise and criticism. Don't fall into the trap of giving just praise and criticism on employee performance. Constructive feedback is more informative and impactful.

- **Constructive feedback** is information-specific, issue-focused, and based on observations. It comes in two varieties:
 - **Positive feedback** - news or input to an employee about an effort well done.
 - **Developmental feedback** - news to an employee about an effort that needs improvement. Developmental feedback doesn't mean a terrible performance, but rather a performance in which the outcomes delivered could be better. So negative is not a negative word in this case.
- **Praise and criticism** are both personal judgments about a performance effort or outcome, with praise being a favorable judgment and criticism an unfavorable judgment. Information given is general and vague, focused on the person, and based on opinions or feelings.

What you should say when giving feedback:

Constructive feedback is full of rich, relevant content that grounds your feedback versus praise or criticism which only describes how you feel about a person's performance, which may be perceived as judgmental and therefore can be debated. The content of your feedback should focus on the behaviors (competencies and skills) you observe being done poorly or successfully.

1. **In your first sentence, identify the topic or issue that the feedback will be about.**

Management Toolkit: Guidelines for Giving Developmental Feedback

2. Provide the specifics of what occurred.

Without the specifics, you only have praise or criticism, which is often less actionable. Start each key point with an "I" message, such as, "I have noticed," "I have observed," "I have seen," or when the need exists to pass on feedback from others, "I have had reported to me." "I" messages help you be issue-focused and get into the specifics.

How you say it:

Manner is how you say the constructive feedback. How you say something often carries more weight than what you have to say — manner is an important element when giving feedback and should not be overlooked.

- **Be prepared and clear about what you want to say before you say it.** Take the time to think through what and how you want to convey your feedback. It is important that your message be clear.
- **Be mindful of where and how feedback is given.** Some staff wants critical feedback in a private setting, whereas others would prefer it in a group to learn from the perspectives of multiple people. When it comes to positive feedback, some staff are very motivated by getting such feedback in a group setting as it makes them look good to their peers/colleagues whereas others prefer it in a more one on one setting. It is important to know who is receiving the feedback, and how the setting it is given in will influence messaging.
- **Be direct and concise when delivering your message.** Get to the point and avoid beating around the bush. Both developmental and positive feedback should be given in a straightforward manner. You do not want your message lost among long paragraphs. Be direct and ask them for understanding about what you shared to ensure the message was received accurately.
- **Avoid generalizations and use specific examples.** Avoid use of the words "all," "never" and "always." Those words are extreme, lack credibility and place arbitrary limits on behavior. Be more precise about quantity or proportion, if you address terms of quantities, at all. Use examples where you directly see a behavior, therefore your message will be credible and enhance the opportunity for learning. Target what is developed and what needs further development. Base your feedback off of your direct observations as much as possible. There are times when this is difficult/impossible, but feedback is most powerful when a manager is able to discuss what he/she has seen directly as opposed to through a messenger.
- **Sculpture feedback to suit the receiver – remember, it's about them, not about you.** When preparing your feedback, keep in mind your receiver and tailor your message so that they can hear it appropriately. If you are angry or frustrated, wait until you can deliver the message to help their performance – not alleviate your frustration.
- **Be sincere and avoid giving mixed messages.** Sincerity says that you mean what you say with care and respect. Mixed messages are referred to as "yes, but" messages. For example, "John, you have worked hard on this project, but. . . ." What follows is something the person is not doing well and is the real point of the message. The word "but" along with its cousins "however" and "although," when said in the middle of a thought, create contradictions or mixed messages. In essence, putting "but" in the middle tells the other person, "Don't believe a thing I said before."
- **In positive feedback situations, express appreciation.** Appreciation alone is praise. Yet when you add it to the specifics of constructive feedback, your message carries an extra oomph of sincerity. For example:

Management Toolkit: Guidelines for Giving Developmental Feedback

"Sarah, you showed good teamwork and efficiency by partnering with Tom to complete the check requests. Everything you did was accurate, as well. Thanks so much for helping out. Such initiative is a real value to the team."

- **In developmental feedback situations, express concern.** A tone of concern communicates a sense of importance and care and provides the appropriate level of sincerity to the message. Tones such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and the ever-popular sarcasm tend to color the language of the message and turn attempts at developmental feedback into criticism. The content of the message gets lost in the noise and harshness. The purpose of developmental feedback is to create awareness that can lead to correction or improvement in performance. If you can't give developmental feedback in a helpful manner, in the language and tone of concern, you defeat its purpose.
- **Give the feedback person-to-person, not through messengers of technology.** The nature of constructive feedback is verbal and informal. That can be done only by talking live to the employee, either face-to-face, or by phone when you physically can't be together.
- **State observations, not interpretations.** Observations are what you see occur whereas interpretations are your analysis or opinion of what you see occur. Tell what you've noticed, not what you think of it, and report the behavior you notice at a concrete level, instead of as a characterization of the behavior. Observations have a far more factual and nonjudgmental aspect than do interpretations. Feedback is most powerful when a manager is able to discuss what he/she has seen directly as opposed to through a messenger.
- **Be careful about giving advice.** When giving feedback, it is often best to do one thing at a time – share your feedback, get the person's response to your feedback, and then, when he/she is more ready to consider additional information, shares your advice with him/her.

When do you give feedback?

Timing answers this question: Give an employee feedback for a performance effort worth acknowledging.

The answer is ASAP (as soon as possible or ASAR – as soon as reasonable/ready). Feedback should be given when either you or the recipient is ready to give/hear the feedback effectively. Feedback is meant to be given in real-time and as close as possible to when the performance incident occurs so that the events are fresh in everyone's minds. When feedback is given well after the fact, the value of the constructive feedback is lessened.

How often should you share feedback?

Feedback should be a fluid part of your regular management conversation and not an awkward event, which only happens when someone's "done something wrong."

This last guideline is the most important because it makes all the other guidelines work. Use constructive feedback regularly to acknowledge real performance. Try to catch and respond to employees doing the job right just as much as you catch and respond to them doing something not quite right — and don't acknowledge how they are performing only once or twice a year.

Giving constructive feedback is a learned management skill, so the more you practice it, the more comfortable you will be incorporating it into your regular check-ins.

Management Toolkit:
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Tracking Feedback:

If the performance appraisal is the summary of feedback for the year, be sure to keep accurate notes on the performance feedback that you give through out the year. These notes should be incorporated into your [Weekly Check-in Form](#). The Weekly Check-in Form will help to identify the trends of how a person's performance is going rather than relying on your memory or the last thing that happened. These notes will also be useful when assessing their development skills – either how they have grown or where they are stuck and struggling to improve. Ideally, feedback is seen as a manager's investment in someone's professional development. Tying these conversations about someone's skill development and their performance ensures that people hear the feedback as relevant and supportive of their future growth and development.

Remember, as you give and track feedback, you want to:

- Keep feedback focused on competencies/tasks within appropriate job competencies or in areas on the Developmental Plan. It can be easy to throw in the “kitchen sink” when giving both positive or developmental feedback, but it will be most constructive when it applies to functions that are specific to a person's position or predetermined areas for development.
- Do not avoid uncomfortable conversations, hoping that they will “work themselves out” over time.
- Do not assume that because the staff member has heard the feedback before that the behavior has been adequately addressed/recognized (even if it was formally addressed as in a Performance Improvement Plan). Often, a staff member will need to hear feedback several times before it sinks in, and opening the lines of communication between a manager and a staff member will facilitate future conversations on the topic.