What makes for an effective feedback system?

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Effective feedback can play an important part in employee development and improving performance.

However, clients frequently inform me that they don't have a strong feedback culture; that feedback is not sufficiently tied to objectives or development, or that it's poorly delivered or ill-timed. In some cases, it's not given at all. In addition, not everyone is comfortable with receiving and acting upon feedback.

How, therefore, do you provide feedback in a way that is constructive and which improves professional development and performance?

I highlight below and discuss 7 factors that are important:

- Climate
- Timing and precision
- Integration
- Role modeling
- Training
- Pull not push
- Appropriate entry points

Climate

It's important to create an organizational climate that's "safe for asking questions, getting feedback, and learning new things. Let employees know that whenever they have questions they can and should reach out to their supervisors and others in higher-level positions." (Klein, Bowman, 2012). Building trust is essential but takes time. As a manager, it's important to be clear about your values and expectations and be constructive with your feedback. Asking for feedback on your own work can help build a dialog and make feedback 2-way.

Timing and precision

Feedback is most valuable when it is timely and specific. While yearly and biannual reviews are commonplace, Wilke (2102) and Rotondo (2012) highlight that a key step in creating a performance-oriented culture is to offer more frequent reviews. This point is reinforced by Mainer (2012), Atwater, Brett and Charles (2011) who emphasize that the feedback is most effective when offered on a far more regular basis, perhaps weekly or in the moment.

Integration

Feedback is normally given during performance appraisals but is more effective if also part of an integrated performance management system. This can include goal setting, development, performance feedback and a goals-based appraisal (Lawler, 2012). Feedback tied to performance goals and development objectives enables the individual and their manager to

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focus on changes that have a greater business impact. Aligning feedback to the development of an individual's interests or strengths can be even more impactful.

Recent studies such as the work by Edward Lawler (2012b) have focused on how to create systemic changes toward performance management, including enrolling employees in online forums and discussion panels where debate is facilitated, encouraged and openly tracked. Ongoing dialogue helps to makes change, transition and growth normative expectations of every employee.

Role modeling

Part of the challenge in development is to make tangible to employees what you are seeking from them. A role model can help demonstrate "what good looks like."

Role models possess the qualities we would like others to emulate. They exhibit the desired behaviors, "live their values and show passion for their work. They are often dedicated to teaching, helping and empowering." (Price-Mitchell, 2011)

It is extremely helpful for those seeking to grow to observe (and be coached by) high performing employees at each level within the organization.

Training

Delivering effective feedback is a learned process that can be guided and developed through education and practice.

It's important to coach supervisors on how, where and when to give performance feedback to their directs. Training should focus on behaviors, skills and developmental milestones; on the delivery of feedback that is honest, constructive, goal-oriented, and rewards learning opportunities; and that helps employees effectively dialogue to clarify the process.

'Pull not push' orientation

A 'pull not push' orientation focuses on progressive development of ability rather than punitive remediation. Pulling entails teaching, coaching, and developing employees rather than pushing - or correcting - them. Pulling says, "Here's how to get ahead in this company". One of the best ways to ensure this is to "always be looking for the teaching moment and nurturing talent rather than correcting performance flaws." Organization's that embody a strong feedback and performance "pull" culture include Ernst and Young, The US Army and Deloitte. (Klein, Bowman, 2012)

Appropriate entry and points

A good way to provide feedback is at key stages of employee transition; to a new hire about employer expectations, setting them forward in a spirit of motivation; an assessment after orientation in the first few weeks of hire; and periodic assessment on whether or not that engagement exists and is being fostered. Career progress checks then become a natural expectation and "one of the surefire ways an employee can appreciate the level of organizational investment in their career." (Wilke, 2012)

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In summary, effective feedback can make a difference to employee development and performance. Providing feedback is a direct way to engage employees in their development. To achieve success there needs to be a supportive climate, clearly defined business expectations and development goals, and frequent constructive feedback that nurtures talent and provides an ongoing dialog on how to grow and succeed.

If designed and delivered well, feedback systems can help build career paths, develop leaders and improve organization performance.

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