

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK GUIDELINES

How can a Manager call attention to an error or a failure in a way that's seen as constructive and supportive? It's not easy, and you're likely to arouse some defensiveness unless you handle the feedback with care. Helping people learn from their mistakes is an important management tool and a key element in maintaining and improving employee performance.

This four-step process will help you minimise defensiveness and turn a potentially unpleasant situation into collaborative problem solving and positive change. The guidelines for giving constructive negative feedback are....

1. Express your concern
2. Understand the whole story
3. Reinforce correct performance
4. Discuss alternatives

1. EXPRESS YOUR CONCERN-

Clear and open communication is a prerequisite to constructive feedback that leads to a solution. That's why it's important to begin the process by carefully and thoroughly explaining what's on your mind. Use "I messages" like: I've noticed the backlog is going up; I'm concerned about....; or I have a problem with.... Avoid opening with a question or anything that may sound like a judgement or accusation. Questions like...Can't you keep up with the work? or where were you when Jim was looking for you? Only serve to increase defensiveness and anxiety. Be tactful but be direct. If you're too subtle, you may create misunderstanding and doubt.

*feedback on performance
improves performance! -
Robert Re*

2. UNDERSTAND THE WHOLE STORY-

Once you've expressed your concern, immediately follow up with a question that invites explanation. For example: What happened? Why was it done that way? Tell me about it. You must understand the problem thoroughly in order to solve it constructively. Listen carefully, ask clarifying questions, and confirm your understanding, even though you might not agree with what the person did in that situation. Use confirming phrases like: What you're saying is..., or Then the reason you.... Genuine listening is a vital ingredient of both motivation and problem solving.

3. REINFORCE CORRECT PERFORMANCE-

Often, you may discover that behind poor performance were the best of intentions. If so, it's important to reinforce the good parts of the performance so that you can focus problem solving only on the error or misjudgement. Otherwise, the person is likely to assume that both the reason and the action were inappropriate or incorrect. For example, suppose a report contained several errors because the Administration Assistant thought it was more important to complete the report by a given deadline. Reinforcing the Administration Assistant's concern for timeliness will help preserve this quality, while seeking solutions to the problem of accuracy.

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4. DISCUSS ALTERNATIVES-

Having expressed your concern, listened to understand the whole story, and focused on the issue by reinforcing good performance, you can now discuss alternative ways to handle the situation the next time it occurs. This is important because it takes the pressure off past performance and looks constructively toward the future.

There are two ways to approach this step. First, if you want to draw out the other person's ideas, or if you can't think of any other alternatives of your own, ask for possible solutions. Second, if you have a suggestion yourself, or if there's only one course of action open, make your suggestion. Don't try to "lead" the other person to a solution you've already thought of by asking a series of questions. People are likely to become resentful of such a manipulative technique.

Here's how it might sound when you want to discuss alternatives. "It was a tight deadline, and I appreciate the extra effort it took to get the report out on time. What can be done to reduce the number of typos and still get the work out on time."

In summary, even negative feedback can be supportive and constructive when you follow a process of open, two-way communication and collaborative problem solving.