

FINANCIAL POST

Reinforce positive behaviour

Performance feedback should not be stored up

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Apart from regularly appraising their employees, bosses should remember not to provide feedback when angry.

Perhaps the most important tool in the modern leader's toolbox is the ability to give effective feedback. Simply defined, feedback is information given to an individual or a group about their behaviour and its effect on the organization.

Feedback is vital to personal development and effectiveness, and employees these days (especially younger ones) have an increasing expectation that they will receive extensive coaching regarding their job performance. Constructive and supportive feedback is given sincerely, without hesitation, and in the spirit of genuine helping. Effective leaders are comfortable delivering feedback as often as is necessary to positively affect employee performance in a wide range of areas.

In many companies, leaders are periodically required to fill out yearly, formal performance appraisals, in which they evaluate or rank each of their employees

on multiple dimensions. Then, they call each employee in for a performance discussion, during which the results are reviewed.

While a well-developed formal performance feedback system is critical (for instance, it often serves as the legal basis for sound human resources decisions), it is insufficient to truly affect employee performance. Feedback needs to be given much more frequently and consistently. Research clearly demonstrates that feedback given immediately following a behaviour has a much greater impact on the likelihood of that behaviour occurring again in the future. Remember, when a leader doesn't give feedback, he or she is sending employees a message -- and probably the wrong one.

How can leaders at all organizational levels become more adept at giving feedback? When communicating with your employees about their job performance, keep the following guidelines in mind:

Tips for giving positive feedback (to encourage desired behaviour): - Describe the performance objectively, specifically and sincerely. Comment on specific behaviours and actions, along with exactly what you liked about it. For example, "Janice, you're really a great leader" is less effective than, "Janice, several employees told me that when you shared your vision for the new organization, you really excited folks and had them approaching team meetings with a completely different mindset." - Deliver feedback as soon as possible after performance. - Don't wait until the performance is perfect. People need positive feedback when their performance improves. Shape employee performance by reinforcing incremental improvements. - Make sure your feedback was indeed a reinforcer by observing whether performance improves or stays the same. - Don't say, "Great job! But" Mixing positive and constructive feedback can be tremendously de-motivating.

Tips for giving constructive feedback (to discourage unwanted behaviour): - Ensure you have clearly stated your expectations to the performer, and that you have provided the direction and the tools necessary for the performer to meet your expectations. - Discuss the performance privately. - Don't provide feedback when you are angry. - Try to talk to the performer as soon as possible after the performance occurs -- do not "store up" or postpone feedback. - Be specific and

objective when discussing undesired performance. What was the performance? When and where did it occur? How did you learn about it? - Describe the desired performance specifically and objectively. - Catch the person doing it right. Look for chances to reinforce behaviour change and improvement. - Use "I" statements -- own your message and be accountable for it. Rather than saying, "You need to improve, " try saying, "I'd like to see you try"

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