Giving 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 praise and criticism on employee performance. Constructive feedback is information-specific, issue-focused, and based on observations. It comes in two varieties:

- Positive feedback is news or input to an employee about an effort well done.
- Negative feedback is news to an employee about an effort that needs improvement. Negative feedback doesn't mean a terrible performance, but rather a performance in which the outcomes delivered should be better. So negative is not a negative word in this case.

There are several things to remember when giving constructive feedback, a few of them include: content, manner, timing, and intent.

CONTENT - What you say in the constructive feedback.

1. Identify the topic or issue that the feedback will be about.
2. Provide the specifics of what occurred.

Without the specifics, you only have praise or criticism. 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.

MANNER - How you say the constructive feedback. As you may know, how you say something often carries more weight than what you have to say — manner is an important element when giving feedback.

- **Be direct when delivering your message.** Get to the point and avoid beating around the bush. Both negative and positive feedback should be given in a straightforward manner.

- **Avoid "need to" phrases, which send implied messages that something that didn't go well.** For example, "Needs to not read straight from the Power Point" This message is not really performance feedback. It implies that the person did not do something well with presenting, but it is not very descriptive. Providing clarity on what occurred is the aim of feedback.

- **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, "Has worked hard on the course, but. . . ." What follows is something the person is not doing well and is the real point of the message. The word "but," along with synonyms "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. Don't forget to recognize the good in a situation.

- **In negative 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 negative feedback into criticism. The content of the message gets lost in the noise and harshness.

  The purpose of negative feedback is to create awareness that can lead to correction or improvement in performance. If you can't give negative 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; 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.

TIMING - When do you give an feedback for a performance effort worth acknowledging?

The answer is ASAP (as soon as possible). Feedback is meant to be given in real-time, 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.

When giving negative feedback, you may want to apply a different timeline: ASAR (as soon as reasonable/ready — that is, when *you're* ready). Sometimes when an incident happens, you aren't feeling too good about it, and you need time to cool off and get your thoughts in order before you give negative feedback (so that your manner displays a tone of concern). Doing that may mean giving the feedback tomorrow rather than right now, but tomorrow is still timely, and your feedback will come across as far more constructive

In short, before giving feedback, follow these simple guidelines:

1. Think about the intent of the feedback. The outcomes are important, and you will be more productive if you think about what you need to say.
2. Be brief, clear, and focused on the intent of your feedback. Ask yourself the question, "What is my intent, and what do I want to see accomplished from this feedback?"
3. Make the feedback timely and constructive. Honestly assess the situation and try to separate interpretation from observation.

EXAMPLES:

Good feedback example:

"Your lecture today was full of good content and visual examples. The beginning of the lecture was energetic, however as the morning went on, your lack of eye contact with the class made it appear as though you were disinterested in the topic. There was little time to ask questions. Time management of the material and ability to answer questions would be helpful."

Bad feedback example:

"The lecture today was ok, you were looking around the room, and that made us feel dumb and that you could have cared less about us. What were you thinking by not letting us answer questions!!?? We cant read your mind. You deserve to be fired."

Adapted from:

- Coaching & Mentoring For Dummies by Marty Brounstein , 2000.
- "Giving Feedback" by Amy Smith, Marshall University School of Medicine