

PROVIDING FEEDBACK IS A LEADERSHIP KEY

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion is a sculptor whose love for the female statue he has created transforms it into a living person. In organizations, a well-documented phenomenon called “Pygmalion effect” shows how managers’ high or low expectations influence employees’ success or failure.

The quality of your questions, encouragement or discouragement of employee input, expression of confidence or lack of it, specific comments on work and non-verbal signals--all determine how employees will perform. Managers create high performing employees by having confidence in their potential and expressing this faith through feedback.

Consequently, an effective way for you to identify and develop leaders in your organization is by developing managers who know how to skillfully deliver feedback that guides and encourages. Such feedback also lays the critical foundation for managing difficult employees.

What is the difference between feedback and performance reviews? You give feedback on the spot by explicitly communicating expectations and by responding to behavior you notice right now. Frequent, informal feedback lays the groundwork for performance reviews but doesn’t replace them. Performance reviews are regular, periodic, scheduled conversations. You make an agenda, as you would for other well-planned meetings, and the outcome of this meeting is a current development plan and updated job description for that employee. The performance review is not the forum to discuss behavior you haven’t already given feedback about.

When leaders throughout the organization give regular feedback about behavior, they create and sustain the underpinning of a performance management system that deals effectively with both high and low performers. Because not all managers are skilled in giving feedback, the organization should provide feedback skills training (with ample practice time) for all supervisors and managers. In well-developed systems, your supervisors and managers receive ongoing support, that is, structured opportunities to enhance feedback skills and to do problem-solving of challenging situations. The other building blocks of well-developed performance management systems are performance reviews, accurate job descriptions, clearly articulated competencies for job roles and training in the skills that make up these competencies.

When organizations leave the quality of manager feedback up to chance, the effects are many and dangerous. Take, for example, my client who describes how morale suffers because many in his organization tiptoe around low performers. Or the client who tells me that because feedback is infrequent under her manager, some team members go to their performance reviews with no idea what they are going to hear. Since there’s no systematic follow-up anyway, some folks get prized projects because they appear to be protégés, while others live with hurt and anger. At worst, potential leaders resign and underperformers stay.

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Effective feedback sounds like this:

- Specific, sincere compliments on work tasks
- Optimistic expectations about an employee’s ability to learn
- Patient follow-through to guide or teach
- Behaviors, not judgments
- Clearly stated expectations for particular tasks or projects
- Specific gaps between expectations and performance
- The effects of these gaps or this behavior
- Explicit, clear agreements, for example, about deadlines and deliverables
- (Often) give-and-take that includes your employee’s ideas about what to do next
- (Sometimes) explicit consequences if a problem is not addressed or action not taken

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A coaching client writes...

“... thanks for everything. You have been a great support. I appreciate your calm and constructive comments.”

*Regional Director
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