

# How to Talk About Work Performance: A Feedback Primer<sup>©</sup>

Esther Derby  
Esther Derby Associates, Inc.

*Providing feedback on work performance is part of every manager's job. Feedback is how people know what they are doing well, and what they need to do differently. Unfortunately, many managers do not receive much training on how to give feedback. Managers who are uncomfortable giving feedback may put it off or hope that hints and general statements will make their point. The author shares what she has learned about providing effective feedback, and advises how to get back on track when a feedback receiver has a puzzling response.*

In a recent workshop, Alex, a new manager, described a situation involving Marie, one of the people in his group. Marie was normally quiet, but when she felt nervous, she interrupted people. In a recent client meeting, Marie interrupted a key customer four times. Alex could see the client was becoming irritated, but Marie did not seem to be aware of what she was doing, or the effect she was having.

I asked him how he had handled the problem with Marie. "Oh, I haven't talked to her about it yet," the new manager replied. "She's basically a good performer. We have a performance review coming up in three months. I'll tell her about it then."

Excellent managers do not wait for the year-end performance cycle to provide feedback. They provide feedback on what is working well and what is not working frequently and to everyone on their staff, not just the underperformers.

Providing useful feedback is not easy. However, it is an important part of a manager's responsibility. In this article, I will share some of what I have learned about how to deliver effective feedback.

## What Is Feedback?

Feedback is the information we give others when we want them to start, stop, continue, or change some behavior [1]. Managers provide the people who report to them with information about results and behavior that relates to work and the work environment. Employees need information to know what they are doing well and where they need to make adjustments to be successful. If managers do not tell them, who will?

According to the authors of "What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback," feedback is "information about the past delivered in the present which may influence future behavior" [1]. Let us look at this definition in detail:

- **Information.** This is not a judgment

or a label, not criticism or praise. First and foremost feedback is information that we can use to understand the current situation and make choices.

- **About past behavior.** Feedback describes some past behavior, something that can be observed, not an interpretation of events.
- **Which may influence future behavior.** Managers give feedback in the hope of changing some aspect of another person's behavior, but of course, that other person has a choice about what to do with the information given.

---

*"Employees need information to know what they are doing well and where they need to make adjustments to be successful."*

---

## What Is in Bounds for Management Feedback?

The goal in giving feedback is not to make sure everyone is charming or performs his or her work exactly the way you would. It is to make sure that the people who work for you are productive. Some of that information you provide to improve productivity may be about work results – timeliness or quality of the work produced or the service delivered.

Other times feedback is about the work environment – the personal actions and interactions that affect the group's ability to work together and accomplish results.

It certainly would make a manager's role easier if everyone had perfect interpersonal skills and behaved congruently at all times. However, we do not. When I

started as a manager, I had a notion that everyone would *act like an adult*. In my years as manager, I discovered that definitions of *adult* behavior vary greatly. In fact, most people act like adults much of the time, and sometimes they do not. When humans feel weak, vulnerable, or under stress, they often behave in a not very grown-up manner [2].

Providing feedback about interpersonal behavior is a more delicate proposition than talking about tangible results. Nonetheless, it is critical. When interpersonal skills and behaviors affect the work environment, it is a manager's responsibility to address it.

When you prepare to provide feedback, make sure it is about the work, and that it is important. Some things are not worth bringing up. I had a staff member who mispronounced certain common words. I grew up with a grammarian, and the staff member's mispronunciations annoyed me. My annoyance was about my preferences, not his work results. In the business context, it was not important. If it is not important, do not bring it up.

Some things are not your business as a manager, but what those things are depends on the context. If you work for a corporation, it is probably not appropriate to talk about an employee's financial situation. However, in a military setting, you may need to know about certain financial events. Check with your human resources (HR) representative or commanding officer to learn what the boundaries are in your situation *before* you cross the line.

## Feedback Guidelines

I have talked about what feedback is, and when it is appropriate for a manager to give feedback. Now what? The following are some guidelines that will help you provide effective feedback.

### **Provide Feedback as Close to the Event as Reasonably Possible**

Do you remember what you had for

lunch yesterday? Like most people, sometimes I do, and sometimes I do not. If someone asks me about an event that happened several weeks or months ago, I may or may not remember depending on the significance the event held for me.

That is why it is important to give feedback as close to the event as possible. People are not likely to remember past events clearly, particularly when they do not have personal significance.

Marie, the employee whose manager, Alex, decided he would wait three months to give her feedback, may not even remember the incident by the time he brings it up. Marie's behavior stood out to Alex, but since it is an ingrained habit, it might not stand out to Marie.

Worse, if Alex waits to tell Marie, how many times will she repeat the gaffe in the intervening three months? Why rob Marie of a chance to improve now rather than later? If Marie's actions affect the entire group by damaging the relationship with the client, why accept the negative effects on the group for longer than necessary?

It might not be easy for Marie to change her habit, but it will be impossible if she is not aware of it.

Late feedback is a lost opportunity. Give the feedback close to the event so that the individual has a choice to change and to improve group performance.

### **Provide Feedback on a Regular Basis**

Regular one-on-one meetings are a great place to provide feedback. Give information for minor course corrections, and discuss what is going well. If you do not have a minor course correction, do not feel like you have to make one up. There is no need to pounce on every little thing. If an employee breaks the build once in a year, or comes in late once in six months, it is not a performance problem [3].

I have a rule of thumb, though, about noticing some positive aspect on a regular basis. Regular recognition for work well done is one of the keys to being a great manager [4]. Even if you do not have regular meetings, find a way to notice and appreciate the work people do *every week*.

People need to know what they are doing well – and should continue doing – as much as they need to know when they are missing the mark.

### **Give Serious Feedback in a Serious Setting**

Hints and off-hand comments in the hallway usually fail to get the message across. If you want an employee to act on your request, be intentional about it. One-on-

ones are fine for small course corrections and positive feedback. Schedule a separate private meeting to address situations that involve a serious performance issue.

### **Address Individual Issues Individually**

Some new managers try to avoid the awkwardness of providing feedback by making policy announcements in staff meetings rather than address the individual directly. General policy announcements do not carry the same weight as an individual conversation.

When the general announcement concerns a specific behavior, the results can be even worse. One new supervisor made a point in his weekly staff meeting of reminding everyone not to use the speakerphone to listen to voice mail. Only one

---

*“First and foremost  
feedback is information  
that we can use to  
understand the current  
situation and make  
choices.”*

---

person in the group had this habit and she felt publicly embarrassed when her supervisor brought it up in the staff meeting. The other members of the team felt unfairly chastised.

If it is important enough to bring up, it is important enough to speak directly to the person involved.

### **Provide Specific Examples**

General statements do not provide enough information for people to know what to improve. Labels, such as *you are sloppy*, set up an oppositional dynamic that goes nowhere. Labels get in the way of solving the problem. Rather than label the behavior, describe it.

Whether you are describing results or behavior, be as specific as you can. A tech writer turned in a chapter that had dozens of spelling and grammar errors. Telling the tech writer that her work is poor quality is not specific enough. If you are concerned about accuracy, state what you have seen: “I noticed that in Chapter 1 there are numerous spelling and grammar errors.”

Say that one of your testers loses his temper in a bug-fix meeting. Rather than tell him he has a temper problem, relate

what you saw and heard. “In the 1 p.m. meeting, you hit the conference table with your fist several times and your face became red.” Then you can discuss what responses are appropriate.

The same guideline holds for feedback about what is going well. Give specific examples. Suppose your technical lead did an exceptional job writing up a site-visit report. Saying, “I really liked the report you wrote,” is a nice compliment, but it does not tell your technical lead what you liked or what he or she did well. Saying, “I particularly liked the way the topics were prioritized. It made the report very easy to follow,” will let your technical lead know that you value a well-organized, easy-to-follow report. Without specific information on what he or she did well, your technical lead might have concluded that you liked the fact the report was printed on pink paper.

Vague references, labels, and guessing games leave employees feeling resentful and confused. Employees are likely to ignore vague feedback. Specific observations give people the information they need to know what result or behavior they need to change.

### **Do Not Rely on Mind Reading**

Do not expect your employees to be mind readers. One employee was surprised when her manager informed her that she was not meeting expectations. “What am I doing wrong?” she asked. “I expect someone at your grade level to know what to do without me having to spell it out,” her manager replied.

Another employee was likewise surprised when his manager told him the way he had handled a customer meeting was unacceptable. “What did I do wrong?” he asked. “You know what you did,” the manager replied.

Dropping hints does not work, nor does making the employee guess what you mean. If you want to see a change, say what it is.

### **Check for Agreement on the Data**

Once you have given some specific examples of the result or behavior you have observed, obtain agreement on the data. If the feedback receiver does not agree with the data, it is going to be hard to move into problem solving.

The tech writer who turned in work with errors will probably acknowledge that there were spelling errors in Chapter 1. She is not as likely to admit to being sloppy. The tester who hit the table will probably admit that he hit the table, but may disagree that he has an anger-man-

agement problem.

Employees are more likely to accept what you say if it is specific and observable.

### **Request a Change**

If you want a behavior to stop or continue, say that. If you want a change, say that, too. Do not leave the employee guessing what he or she needs to do to correct the situation.

The tech writer's manager might say something like, "I have marked spelling and proofing errors on the copy you gave me. In the future, I'd like you to run spell check and proofread before you turn in your work."

The table-hitting tester's boss might say, "I know you can't control when your face becomes red; hitting the table with your fist is not acceptable."

### **Engage in Problem Solving**

If you want a different result, but have latitude on how that result is achieved, move into problem-solving mode. The tech writer's manager might say, "I was surprised at the number of spelling and proofing errors in the chapters you turned over to me. I expect copy to be clean when I receive it. What are three ways you could make sure the copy is in good shape?"

The tech writer might reply, "Well, I could run spell check, proof it on paper, or ask Jessica do a final check."

When the employee arrives at the solution, it is more likely to fit his style, and is more likely to stick.

### **Agree on How You Will Follow Up**

Sometimes you will need to follow up on the changes you have requested. The tech writer and her manager might agree that he will skim for obvious spelling and grammar errors and if he finds them, he will return the work to her to fix.

### **Check for Understanding**

Saying the words is not enough. When giving feedback is part of your job, you also need to check to make sure the message you sent is the same one the employee heard. Checking for understanding can help correct some of the slippage that normally occurs in conversation.

One manager I know wraps up feedback conversations by saying, "I'm going to check for understanding now. I'd like you to summarize our conversation for me so I'm sure I have been clear."

Charlie told Shanna, a recent college graduate, that the code she had checked in had broken the build three times in a

week. He was concerned that the code was brittle and wanted her to do more unit testing. When Charlie asked Shanna to summarize their feedback conversation, Shanna replied, "You are disappointed in me. I need to be more careful."

Charlie was able to correct Shanna's misperception. He was not disappointed in her – actually, he was quite pleased with her work in general. He had noticed a pattern and wanted her to take some additional steps so she and the entire group would be more successful.

For many people, hearing criticism is an emotionally charged situation. When people are in the throes of an emotional response, they often do not hear clearly.

---

*"The goal in giving feedback is not to make sure everyone is charming or performs his or her work exactly the same way you would. It is to make sure that the people who work for you are productive."*

---

As a feedback giver, you do not have control over how someone else will respond to your feedback. However, checking for understanding can clear up some obvious misinterpretations.

### **Troubleshooting Feedback Conversations**

When you are careful and intentional in giving feedback, you greatly increase the chance that you will be successful. You will state what you have observed clearly. The receiver will agree with your observation, you will do some joint problem solving, and agree on a course of action.

In real life, even when you follow all these guidelines, sometimes the feedback receiver will have a response that is surprising or puzzling.

As we saw with Charlie and Shanna, you cannot control how the feedback receiver interprets what you say, how they react emotionally to that interpretation, and how they respond.

When the receiver responds in a puzzling way – perhaps with an angry out-

burst or with tears – you will need some strategies to bring the feedback conversation back on track.

### **Check the Data**

When people are upset, they often do not hear clearly. Ask the feedback receiver to repeat what he heard and what he saw. When one manager asked a staff member what he heard her say after a puzzling response, he described the way the manager was leaning forward, the tone of her voice, her facial expression – but no words. He was reacting primarily to what he had seen. Once the manager repeated the words, and her staff member heard them, they were able to move forward.

### **Check for Interpretation**

If the words made it through intact but the interaction is still tangled, check how the receiver interpreted your words. We all make meaning of what we hear; in most cases, our interpretation is close enough to allow productive communication. Sometimes our interpretation is way off, and then it helps to check.

Shanna interpreted Charlie's feedback as criticism. Charlie had noticed a pattern and was offering information to help Shanna be more effective. When Charlie asked Shanna to summarize for understanding, he was able to see that Shanna's interpretation was a little off.

### **Ask What Is Happening**

Sometimes a feedback response is still puzzling even after you have checked the data and the interpretation. This may indicate other forces are at work. Perhaps your feedback triggered a memory or association with a painful past event. Perhaps the feedback receiver has a perfection rule, and any comment that indicates his work is not perfect is difficult. As a manager, it is not your job to psychoanalyze. It is your job to try to get the conversation back on track. I have found that when I can sincerely say, "I'm puzzled by your response. What's happening for you?" I'm often able to redirect the conversation to the present circumstance.

Sometimes it is tempting to think we know what is behind someone else's behavior. For example, one manager reported after a year-end review that her employee was angry and resistant during the performance discussion.

"What did you see or hear that lead you to that conclusion?" I asked.

"After I told him that our senior manager wasn't sure what he did, he asked for examples," the manager said.

"That seems like a reasonable

## COMING EVENTS

**January 20-22**

*Institute for Defense and Government  
Advancement Network Centric Warfare*  
Arlington, VA  
[www.idga.org](http://www.idga.org)

**January 26-28**

*3rd Annual Conference on the  
Acquisition of Software-Intensive Systems*  
Arlington, VA  
[www.sei.cmu.edu/products/events/  
acquisition](http://www.sei.cmu.edu/products/events/acquisition)

**February 1-4**

*3rd International Conference on  
COTS-Based Software Systems*  
Redondo Beach, CA  
[www.iccbss.org/2004](http://www.iccbss.org/2004)

**February 3-5**

*WEST 2004*  
*Western Conference and Exposition*  
San Diego, CA  
[www.west2004.org](http://www.west2004.org)

**March 1-3**

*17th Conference on Software Engineering  
Education and Training (CSEET 2004)*  
Norfolk, VA  
[www.cs.virginia.edu/cseet04](http://www.cs.virginia.edu/cseet04)

**March 8-11**

*Software Engineering Process  
Group Conference 2004*



Orlando, FL  
[www.sei.cmu.edu/sepg](http://www.sei.cmu.edu/sepg)

**March 30-31**

*3rd Annual Southeastern Software  
Engineering Conference*  
Huntsville, AL  
[www.ndia-tvc.org/SESEC](http://www.ndia-tvc.org/SESEC)

**April 19-22**

*2004 Software Technology Conference*



Salt Lake City, UT  
[www.stc-online.org](http://www.stc-online.org)

request," I said.

"Well, when I started to tell him that no one should have to ask what he did, he got real quiet," she continued. "He was so angry he couldn't speak."

"Did you check that out?" I asked.

"Well, no. I could just tell!"

Of course, we cannot just tell. This manager's employee might have been mystified, hurt, ashamed, or angry. He may have realized that he was not going to receive any useful information from his manager and decided that silence was his best course of action.

Sometimes we see external signs that lead us to believe that someone is feeling a certain way, but unless we check it out, we just do not know.

### Dealing With Strong Reactions

Sometimes people react strongly to feedback. What do you do if someone starts to cry when you are giving feedback? Avoid the temptation to rush to comfort. Nudge a box of tissues across the desk and remain seated and quiet. Stare at the floor if you must. When the crying stops, continue. If the crying continues for more than several minutes, ask the employee if he or she needs a few minutes to regain composure. Ask the employee to return in five to 10 minutes.

I had an employee storm out of my office and slam the door during a feedback conversation about appropriate behavior during technical design meetings. I rescheduled the meeting and when he arrived for the next feedback discussion, I started by saying, "In our last meeting, you chose to walk out. This is a scheduled performance discussion, and if you refuse to participate, I'll start the formal process with HR." He chose to stay. Some organizations classify refusing to have a conversation with your manager as insubordination, and consider it grounds for dismissal. Check with your HR department, company lawyer, or commanding officer.

If an employee starts to yell, tell him or her that you are interested in what he or she has to say, but that you cannot hear when he or she is yelling. If the yelling continues, ask the employee to stop yelling. If he or she does not stop, end the meeting. You can end the meeting by asking the employee to leave or by leaving yourself. If you feel physically threatened, call security. If the situation gets to this point, it is beyond day-to-day feedback. Get HR involved right away.

Providing feedback takes thought and effort. It can be intimidating to bring up issues with another person. When I find I

am feeling it is a lot of work to bring up an issue, I ask myself this: If I were missing the mark on my work, or had a habit that was getting in the way of others doing their work, would I want to know? I always answer yes. Most people do.

As with many things in life, practice does make providing feedback easier. Start practicing with reinforcing feedback and minor course corrections in one-on-one meetings. Then when you need to bring up bigger issues, both you and your staff will have had a chance to learn about giving and receiving feedback. ♦

### References

1. Seashore, Charles N., Edith Whitfield Seashore, and G. M. Weinberg. What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback. Attleboro MA: Douglas Charles Press, 1992: 3-7.
2. Satir, Virginia. The New People Making. Mountain View, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1988: 20-29.
3. Fournies, Ferdinand F. Coaching for Improved Work Performance. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000: 117.
4. Buckingham, Marcus, and C. Coffman. First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999: 48.

### About the Author



**Esther Derby** is founder and president of Esther Derby Associates, Inc., a management consulting firm based in Minneapolis,

Minn. Derby works with software project teams to start projects on a solid footing, assess the current state of the project, and capture lessons learned during and after the project. She also coaches and trains technical people who are making the transition into management. Derby is technical editor of STQE magazine and regular columnist for Stickyminds.com and Computerworld.com. Derby is publisher of the quarterly newsletter, *insights*. She has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Minnesota and a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership.

**Esther Derby Associates, Inc.**  
3620 11th Ave. S.  
Minneapolis, MN 55407  
Phone: (612) 724-8114  
E-mail: [derby@estherderby.com](mailto:derby@estherderby.com)