

## Giving Constructive Feedback - for Supervisors



**Giving constructive feedback** in the workplace - especially negative feedback – can be one of the most heart-pounding experiences for both supervisors and workers. A sense of threat typically permeates the experience as supervisors fear alienating and losing a worker, and workers fear for their job and sense of self. Ironically, the more tension-filled the experience, the less chance the feedback will be successful - it may even backfire and make worker performance worse. The key to successful feedback is in creating a mental space free of fear and helping workers to honestly evaluate their current actions against more desirable future actions. They can only do this when the threat level is low and their defenses are lowered. Let's explore a simple process here to enable you to do this.

## Feedback's Essential Role

**Giving feedback** is a core element in a healthy workplace culture, the supervisory process, and business success. Like an autopilot navigating an airliner, continuous feedback triggers thousands of minor course corrections keeping the aircraft (or your work team) moving in the right direction. Corrective feedback, given appropriately, has been proven as being effective at improving worker performance – companies who master it have an advantage. While the task of giving feedback fills many supervisors with a sense of dread, studies show that feedback is considered very valuable by workers - and is a major factor in their job satisfaction and performance. Those who value it also rated their managers highest for being honest and straight forward in their reviews. Supervisors skilled at delivering feedback can have a major impact on a worker's confidence and career and ultimately company profit. Supervisors in this category are always in high demand.

## Focus on Helping



**The goal of feedback** should always be to help workers improve, not to criticize or reprimand. Giving feedback can be as stressful and hard as hearing it, which often results in delay or avoidance until a crisis develops. A shift in focus from criticism to helping improve performance transforms the fear of judgement into beneficial advice and evaporates the fear for both parties. Consider that if you were doing something poorly, you'd probably be appreciative if someone kindly let you know what you're doing wrong, and provided helpful suggestions. Frame your message as helpful by recommending a better way or highlighting a new approach to reach team goals, and resist the urge to criticize or reprimand. Unless your feedback contains helpful information relevant to future activities, it's probably just an opinion and not worth sharing.

## Follow These 5 Steps to Give Feedback

**1. Get Ready** – Know the facts (who / what / where / when / why). Be clear on specific concrete examples of the behaviors that need correction, followed by what your expectations are. Avoid giving feedback when you are feeling frustrated or judgmental. The best way to give feedback is privately face-to-face. Choose a quiet location and a low-stress time for a conversation – when there are no expected distractions – without making a big deal about it. Ask the worker for permission to check-in on progress.



Check in with yourself and ensure your mindset is focused and helpful. **Your tone and body language** is the most important element in your interaction...keep your tone matter-of-fact conversational, not overly professional or personal. If you come across as being open and sincere, the employee is likely to respond in the same way.

**2. Invite Them To Self-Evaluate** – Evaluations trigger deep primal fear of judgement in any of us who have experienced harsh criticism in the past. Even the possibility of repeating this experience clamps an iron lid on the interaction. Inviting a worker to rate their own performance immediately drops the threat level by putting them in control. It also acknowledges they may already know where their performance is failing. You may be pleasantly surprised as they do the evaluation work for you. Go quiet, and actively listen, taking in body language and other cues.

What are they really trying to tell you? Ask open ended questions when appropriate.

**3. Affirm What They Did Well** – Acknowledging their strengths again lowers the threat and shifts the refocuses from being a good or bad person to specific behaviors. Like everyone, they have strengths and weaknesses, and your job is to affirm one and give perspective on the other.

#### 4. Provide Suggestions for Improvement -

Share your suggestions on how they can improve their performance going forward – potentially improving their output by streamlining their effort. Frame your suggestions using a helping mindset, and emphasize that you are drawing their attention here to help them improve their performance. Keep it simple, and focus on one main behavior to change. Be specific, encouraging, and provide actionable steps for improvement. Ensure the worker is clear on your expectations moving forward, and them in setting a personal goal. Offer assistance and help, and have an ‘open-door’ policy. Make sure they know you are ‘on their side’ and have faith in their abilities to change.



*“I think we’ve agreed today’s job wasn’t up to the company standard. For everyone’s benefit, we need you onboard with checking off on all work and safety procedures before beginning the job. Are we agreed on this? Feel free to check in before you begin if you like. Is there anything else I can do to help?” (Expectation)*

**5. Clarify** - Finish by checking that you are in agreement on where performance can be improved, the goal, and your expectations - can they repeat it back in their own words? Clarify and make any needed corrections, then end the meeting on a positive note. Ask for a commitment. Document the meeting and key points in your supervisor’s log, give the worker some time to change behaviors, then follow up with recognizing positive progress.



*“Thanks for your time and willingness...just so we’re totally on the same page – can you confirm the next steps in your own words?”*

*A tennis instructor got a new client with all sorts of problems. Her stance was wrong. She was holding the racket wrong, her weight was on the wrong foot, and her swing was obnoxious. They worked diligently on all the issues but she still didn't improve.*

*Finally, in desperation and with her about to quit, he focused on her stance only, and instantly her game improved.*

*Once she'd mastered the stance, they worked on how she held the racket until she got it. They moved on to her swing, and for the first time she beat the instructor in a match. They focused on the remaining issues one at a time, until she had mastered them*



*all...then she replaced the instructor when he was promoted!*

*The motive of the story is: keep it simple – focus on one main issue at a time!*

## Share Feedback to All Workers

Don't make the mistake of only giving feedback to those who most require improvement. Failing to provide feedback to your best workers can risk losing them, incurring a very expensive replacement process. It's important to provide feedback to all workers. As a supervisor your job is to ensure your team is communicating

effectively and working toward a common goal. When there is little communication, workers may drift off toward other objectives. Providing regular constructive feedback enhances communication and is a good way to prevent issues early and keep the team moving toward a common goal. Motivational experts have suggested that 5 positives for every 1 negative is about the right proportion for feedback...everyone likes praise! Be a role model by asking for feedback on your performance as well, and be open to hearing it.



## What If Self-Evaluation is a No-Go?

If the worker is not willing to self-evaluate, or your intuition tells you flat-out that it's not appropriate, you can fall back to the more traditional SBI method (Situation / Behavior / Impact):



- Describe the **situation**
- Describe the Specific **behaviors** exhibited ('this occurred' not 'you did this').
- Express concerns about the Impact of the **behaviors** - and why it's hurting performance
- Then go quiet and actively listen

Follow up with affirming what they did well followed by advice on how they might improve in the future. If the worker does not respond well, be kind, and return to the facts. While you can't control the worker, you can and must control your own reactions. If the situation is too tense, or the feedback is particularly hard-hitting, consider taking a time-out or giving the worker some time off to absorb your expectations.

### Positive - praise effort, not ability:

*"I was observing you service the client's vehicle this morning (Situation) and I was impressed that you were fast and efficient and followed all safety protocols. (Behavior) The effort you put in was an excellent model for the new people and saves me a lot of training time." (Impact)*

### Negative - state the facts and impact:

*"I was observing you service the client's vehicle this morning (Situation) and noticed two work procedure steps (2 and 5) were skipped and the safety protocols (like locking out electrical energy) were not followed (Behavior). It concerns me that it's just a matter of time before we have another incident, plus it sets a bad example for our new people which I'll have to correct. (Impact)*



**Avoid 'You' statements:** *“the machine was not adjusted to standards, resulting in the loss of this load”*; not *“you screwed up the machine settings and lost us a lot of money”*. To be useful and impactful, your feedback should focus on the positive or negative behaviors (as opposed to the worker personally) and the impact of their actions.

**Providing feedback** demonstrates your investment in worker progress and development, and shows that you care enough about workers to share sometimes inconvenient truths. Practicing giving feedback regularly in daily conversations or weekly meetings makes it a natural occurrence and helps dissipate the sense of threat.