

Delivering Good Feedback

by

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Organizations place a strong emphasis on communication. It's critical to their success.

One important form of communication is "feedback." Employees need ongoing feedback from supervisors, co-workers (and customers)—and not just during formal reviews.

Unfortunately, we neglect this critical understanding. We need to deliver feedback in a timely manner.

Like clean oil in the engine of a car, good feedback can significantly improve how things run. It also plays a key role in building strong working relationships. Yet, despite this acknowledged value, feedback, something readily at our disposal, is a neglected and often abused form of communication.

Why do we neglect something so essential?

Who can say? We may have assumed feedback is another form of conversation, something we do all the time. If we talk a lot we must be good at it. This logic does not hold up very well.

We lack training in giving feedback.

You have to look hard to find interpersonal communication emphasized in colleges and other educational providers. Few have exposure to good practitioners—therefore we do not know what healthy feedback looks or sounds like.

Feedback is often a negative process and we work at avoiding uncomfortable situations. Nonprofits are sometimes concerned about offending volunteers. Volunteers need help, too.

So what is feedback? How should we view this process? How can we improve this very important facet of our work?

In his practical book, **“Getting It Done”** (Harper), author Roger Fisher offers clarity on a concept largely undefined. Feedback, says Fisher, has three key parts:

Appreciation

To encourage and improve morale. This is an expression of gratitude or approval of another’s effort. It’s an expression of emotion, designed to meet an emotional need.

Advice

To help individuals improve their skills. Advice consists of suggestions about particular behavior that should be repeated or changed. It focuses on the performance, rather than on judging the person.

Evaluation

This relates to making wise decisions about personnel and their assignments. An effective way to do this is by ranking the subject’s performance in relation to that of others or against an explicit or implicit set of standards.

If you go to the dictionary and look up “appreciation,” “advice” and “evaluation,” you would then have a basic understanding of these words. However, the genius in Fisher’s analyses lies in these observations of feedback gone awry:

- We fail to understand there are different types of feedback
- We co-mingle the types (doing two things at one time—sending mixed signals)
- We use one type (appreciation) when we should have used another (evaluation)

Think for a moment about the last time you gave or received feedback. Was it clear? Appropriate for the circumstance? Or did you get (or give) appreciation when you should have received (or given) advice? Just knowing there are different kinds of feedback has the potential to improve the quality of our leadership.

There is only virtue in doing, someone once said; we need to find a way to act on this knowledge.

The goal should be consistent incorporation of the insights Fisher identifies. We are, after all, giving feedback on a continual basis. How much better it would be to try and get it right the first time. Properly used, feedback is a powerful process

“Practice” was the counsel given to the person who asked how to get to Carnegie Hall. To realize the potential of all three types of feedback--appreciation, advice and evaluation-- the same advice applies.

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