How2 apply the eight ground rules for giving feedback

	Author:	Diane Bailey
	Position:	Managing Director
	Organisation Name:	Diane Bailey Associates
	Area of Expertise:	Appraisal, Customer Service, Induction, Leadership, Management Development, Teamwork, Managing small to medium size projects

Introduction

Please note that this is the second Byte of a two part series of Knowledge Bytes on feedback. To read the previous Byte in the series, please go to: "How2 develop your feedback skills".

This Knowledge Byte will look in more depth at the eight ground rules for good feedback mentioned in the first Byte.

Main

Eight ground rules for good feedback

Sticking to the right ground rules given here will help you to give useful, constructive and actionable feedback without stirring up conflict or confrontational behaviour:

1. Be objective and timely.
2. Focus on what you see not on what you believe/assume.
3. Focus on behaviour not on personality.
4. Keep the feedback neutral, not judgemental.
5. Make the feedback supportive not blaming/threatening.
6. Use feedback to inform not to advise or direct.
7. Keep the feedback simple, don't overdo it.
8. If you give feedback you may have to accept some.

1. Be objective and timely

Consider this statement used at an appraisal meeting:

> *"Your performance over the past year has been poor. You have been careless and negligent and haven't paid enough attention to detail and to what the organisation need. You don't seem to be pulling your weight and your team is not up to scratch. You seem to be lazy and disorganised. Overall I'm disappointed with you and your performance".*

If this statement was made to you at your appraisal meeting by your Manager you would be entitled to ask some questions? These could include:

- "How/where has my performance been poor?"
- "How have I been negligent or careless?"
- "Which details and/or organisational needs have I neglected?"
- "How is my team not up to scratch?"
- "What, anyway is 'scratch'?"
- "What makes you think I'm lazy, disorganised, and not pulling my weight?"
- "Why are you disappointed?"
- "If you are disappointed why wait until now to tell me?"
- "Why didn't you talk to me before now?"
- "If things are so bad why have you, as my Manager not been helping me to get them right?"
- "Where's your evidence for all of these accusations?"
- "What do you expect me to do now? Later?"
- "Why should I listen to this?"

The statement given above is neither objective nor timely. There are no examples, facts or specific details given to support the accusations. Also, if the individual really is not performing well, why has it only been addressed at the appraisal meeting? Why has the Manager not been:

- Discussing performance at the monthly one-to-one meetings?
- Trying to help with improvements at the time problems actually happened?
- Giving feedback soon after problems have been spotted?

2. Focus on what you see not what you believe or assume

What you see happen or not happen is real and factual. What you believe or assume is based on supposition and inference. It is your **personal** interpretation of what you have seen. Your interpretation could be wrong. For example, an otherwise punctual employee who has suddenly started to be late on a regular basis may be having domestic problems rather than being 'idle' or 'time-wasting'. Someone who is not coping well with a new task may simply not know how to do it, rather than being 'stupid' or 'idle'.

3. Focus on behaviour not on personality

What people do is their behaviour and this is what you can see. Personality, you can generally only guess at. However, people do, as a rule, behave in a way which is linked to their personality. It is too easy to fall into the trap of believing that behaviour is always an external expression of personality.

It doesn't matter whether you like or dislike an individual's personality. The personality only becomes important if it leads to work or relationship difficulties. Even then you have no right to criticise the personality or expect the individual to change it. What you do have a right to do, as a Manager, is to comment on and/or question the behaviour of the individual. When the behaviour is a problem for you, the team or the organization, you do have a right and indeed, a responsibility to work with the individual to get them to change the behaviours which have the wrong effects.

It is much less threatening for individuals when you comment on specific examples of wrong or difficult behaviours rather than making derogatory remarks about their personality.

4. Keep the feedback neutral not judgemental

Any judgements you make about what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' are based on your own frame of values. For example punctuality may be a strong value for you, whereas the individual to whom you are giving feedback may see *punctuality* as less important than *quality of input.* If you assume that their regular lack of punctuality reflects laziness or lack of focus on their work you could be quite accusatory when discussing this with them. The individual, on receiving accusations of laziness or failure to consider their work, could become defensive or just plain 'switch off' because you display *(to them)* an inability to see things as they really are.

If, for example, one very talkative and enthusiastic team member appears to hog time at the team meeting you may need to address this to make sure other team members get a chance. To say *"You talked too much at this afternoon's meeting"* may be seen by the individual as your flawed judgement – their "too much" may not be yours and they may be feeling proud of their detailed input and lively contribution. If you just comment *"You talked for 80% of the time at today's meeting"* it is not a judgement but a fact. The individual can make their own judgement as to the possible effect, on the meeting and on other team members of their talking for 80% of the available time. With this approach you may encourage the individual to retain their enthusiasm but to consider reducing or focusing their input better so that others get a fair share of available time.

5. Make the feedback supportive not blaming or threatening

As a Manager your purpose in giving feedback is to help people and the organisation, not to 'get at' or score over people.

Feedback, to be useful, needs to be searching and detailed so it should be specific to the individual involved. It is therefore important that you are sensitive about how and when you offer feedback.

The language you use and the expressions you choose need to be carefully thought through. You do not want what you say to be received as a threat or a put-down. Look at these two examples:

- "I need to talk to you about your last contact with the tenant at No. 17."
- "I thought the way you handled that problem for Mr X was very good. If you like, I've got a couple of ideas on how you could make it even better next time."

Both statements mean the same thing i.e. that you wish to discuss *(and comment on)* something you have observed. The first sounds threatening, the other is very positive.

Words and phrases which usually annoy people and which you should try to avoid include:

- "You should have known better ..."
- "I can see no point in ..."
- "You must realise that ..."
- "I find it difficult to believe/understand ..."
- "Don't be stupid ..."
- "Obviously you should ..."
- "With respect ..."
- "You can't do that ..."

Also avoid:

- Putting the other person down by words, expressions or non-verbal behaviour
- Avoid superior sounding phrases/judgements.

You will want to make sure that people know when/what they are doing well. The phrase "Even better if" is very useful when you need to encourage someone to do something better or differently.

When you give feedback it is also very important to remember these basic rules: praise in public, criticise in private and provide feedback soon after the example/situation you have observed. Remember too that perceptions differ, so if someone comes to you and sounds pleased about how they handled something, it probably wouldn't be too sensible to shatter all their illusions immediately. Much better to say something like *"You certainly did X well. Let's get a cup of tea and discuss the whole thing"*.

6. Use feedback to inform not to advise or direct

Talking to people about what you have seen/observed leaves them to make decisions/judgements about what they need to do next time. Giving people clear directions about what to do takes away their freedom of decision and may be resented. It will certainly rarely result in any real change.

Feedback should avoid offering solutions or your pet suggestion. In performance terms you will, at times, need to help the individual develop plans to solve a problem or improve what they do. This is best handled by asking for their suggestions rather than giving them your solution, Questions such as these can be helpful:

- "What would happen if?"
- "How could you change that?"
- "What could you do if?"
- "How do you think they will feel about that?"

Your role here is to encourage the individual to think the situation through and to devise their own solution. *(They will be much more committed to their solution than to yours).*

7. Keep the feedback simple, don't overdo it

Most of us can only process one or two bits of information at one time. This means that if you give someone too much feedback at once they won't be able to deal with it and they certainly won't be able to make use of the information.

Feedback on one or two points at the one time is much more useful than feedback on six or seven minor points. It is also, of course, important to remember to give feedback as soon as possible after something has happened or been observed by you.

8. If you give feedback you may have to accept some

If you give feedback to others on their behaviour and performance, it is likely that they may want to offer you some feedback. Make it easy for them to do so, as their feedback could be very helpful to you.

At one-to-ones or appraisal meetings with your staff get into the habit of asking questions such as:

- "What else could I do to help your work/performance?"
- "Am I doing/have I done anything which has caused you any problems?"
- "What would you like to change about my behaviour towards you/towards the team?"
- "What do you find easy/hard about working here with me/us?"

Good feedback is a two-way thing. To be effective you should try for a two-way responsive discussion which is directed towards a desired/required outcome. The person receiving the feedback needs to be encouraged to be responsive, to discuss what is being considered and to set their own goals for improvement and/or change. Encourage people to ask questions to get more information and to ensure greater understanding.

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