



A Guide for Organizations Looking to Exploit the Power of Employee Performance Feedback.

Performance Feedback Essentials

Who should read this paper?

This whitepaper is for organizations who are looking to shake up and modernize their performance management processes by harnessing the power of continuous and proper performance feedback but are unclear on how to properly manage and deploy a feedback model in their organization or incorporate feedback into regular reviews. This paper discusses why feedback is essential, why it is resisted, and how we can use technology to bring a tired performance-management process back to life.





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“Feedback is essential, feedback is hard” so says Dutch psychologist Coert Visser. For generations, HR and managers across every industry have been dogged by these duelling interests: How can feedback, both positive and negative, be delivered in a way that actually makes employee performance improve? How can constructive criticism be delivered without de-motivating employees, and how can praise be delivered in a way that supports continued growth? What makes an employee take feedback to heart without taking it personally? What makes feedback stick, last, add value, and bring real change?

Making the most of feedback requires a clear understanding of why feedback is essential, why it is hard, and how we can use technology to bring a tired performance-management

Unfortunately, there are no standard answers to these questions as each organization and each employee within it is truly unique. It is, however, possible for HR and managers to make the most of feedback by developing a clear understanding of why feedback is essential, why it is hard, and how we can use technology to bring a tired performance-management process back to life.

Modern processes are shifting the familiar. Technology is bringing frequent, real-time, year-round, enterprise-wide feedback to organizations and is shaking up traditional reviews. Frequent feedback is an old idea for the new generation, who have grown up with Facebook “likes” and comments on their blogs. Now, this same kind of day-to-day feedback can be deployed to improve performance—and performance appraisals—within a company.

Why feedback is essential

Performance Feedback: An Overlooked Opportunity Cost

The term ‘opportunity cost’ is accounting jargon used when referring to the forgone value of a path not chosen. Because feedback is often feared, it is often avoided and organizations are missing the great value that could be delivered from it.

There are misconceptions that feedback is only necessary for employees in need of serious development and coaching. Research has proven that incompetent people are often too incompetent to even know they are incompetent. That’s the funny take on the story, but it is also true that talented people often do not know how good they are. The reality is that everyone needs feedback.

A manager may spend days or weeks searching for a way to phrase criticism delicately, meanwhile, an employee continues to fumble in the dark, wanting nothing more than a clear indication that she is or isn’t on the right track.



Employees are often less concerned with displays of approval than they are with doing a good job.

Feedback serves four essential purposes:

Constructive developmental advice – The most important use of feedback is helping someone perform better. In Hollywood movies a great leader improves performance with an inspiring speech; in real life a great leader improves performance through constructive feedback. The great leader is a careful observer who gives specific advice on what someone needs to do to get better.

Encouragement – The most common use of feedback is simply to give encouragement. There is nothing like a simple “good job” from a colleague to make you feel positive and give you the energy to stay productive.

Acknowledgement – Within organizations a simple but potent type of feedback is acknowledgement. When an employee completes a task or achieves a milestone they may not expect a pat on the back, but they do like some acknowledgement that their accomplishments have been noticed.

Rebukes – The most difficult type of feedback is criticism of poor performance. Telling someone their presentation was unprofessional or that they let the team down has its risks, but at times people need a reality check in order to develop their skills and the rebuke provides it.

It isn't challenging to find the value in continuous employee feedback. We can easily convince managers that feedback is essential, which then leaves us wondering why they don't do a better job of it? That brings us to the next piece of the puzzle—understanding why feedback is hard.

Why feedback is hard

Is organizational structure or human nature holding you back?

One reason that feedback is hard has to do with organizational structure, another with human nature. Many organizations are structured so that a lot of work is done in teams and across department boundaries. Feedback is hard to get because the immediate boss may not be closely involved in someone's day-to-day work and organizations are simply not set up to encourage and document feedback from others.

It is also hard to give feedback due to human nature. The most important type of feedback, developmental criticism, is hard to give and may be even harder to get



because sometimes people don't care about the issue, don't find the feedback helpful, or take what is meant to be helpful advice as a rebuke. These are all solvable problems.

Delivering Constructive Feedback

There are five points to consider when giving proper constructive feedback:

If you can't be sensitive – don't give feedback.

Don't waste time giving feedback on issues the person doesn't care about. If an engineer genuinely does not care that her presentations are boring, then giving advice on how to make them more interesting will fall on deaf ears. Give feedback where it will serve a purpose, otherwise don't bother.

Take time to understand the person's needs. Telling someone that all they need to do is check the static IP addresses on the router isn't much help to a user who doesn't know what an IP address is. Too often advice does not get at what the person really needs. The solution is to ask some questions before you jump in with feedback, so that you can be sure the feedback really will be helpful.

Be sensitive. Everyone needs to understand that giving feedback that leaves the other person upset usually does more harm than good; if you can't be sensitive don't give feedback.

Don't expect employees to read between the lines. This is a common practice. Managers are hesitant to confront employees or simply do not make the time to properly plan or schedule proper feedback sessions. Instead, they make a comment or send a small email and sandwich the feedback in other content. Employees cannot be expected to analyze their supervisors words or intents – and for good reason. No organization wants their employees spending time deducing meaning. If managers have something relevant and productive to say – positive or constructive – have on with it and be clear.

Think of feedback as constant nudges keeping employees motivated and on-track.

Be timely, specific, and focus on behaviour. The best employee feedback is timely, specific, and focuses on behaviour and not the person or the intent. Solution-oriented feedback revolves around managers being committed to development and improvement rather than stone cold critique. Vague comments leave room for employee confusion and interpretation and feedback that isn't timely can be a complete waste of time if the incident or project has passed.



We will talk more about what HR can do to promote effective feedback, but before we do that let's look at how technology enables a new dimension to feedback and changes the world of performance management.

How technology is reinventing feedback

Technology is shaking up traditional performance management - in a BIG way.

A big part of managing performance is giving feedback. The trouble is that in traditional performance-appraisal systems the feedback comes too rarely, too late, and from too few people. Technology changes the equation and is shaking up traditional performance reviews in a big way.

A sudden blast of unaccustomed feedback once a year, whether positive or negative, isn't likely to have much impact on long term employee performance. A manager who rarely offers feedback will eventually seem disconnected from an employee's daily activities. On the other hand, regular doses of meaningful feedback builds trust on both sides. Trust leads to credibility, and credibility leads to open ears and a calm, flexible response to performance assessment. Regular feedback transforms the review process from an intimidating event to an every-day communication tool. Think of feedback as constant nudges keeping employees on-track and helping them to reach their goals.

How do you enable this cycle of continuous feedback? Simple. Technology has given organizations a platform for sharing instant performance feedback. Any size company is now able to exploit cost effective and secure solutions for enabling the real-time organization-wide exchange of performance feedback.

How this works is straightforward: if someone has some feedback they type a note online and send it to the person, their manager, or both. It happens in real time, it happens all the time, and it comes from anyone with something useful to say, even if they are in another department.

Because feedback is being captured, at year end the manager has a rich trove of data on which to base a thoughtful appraisal.

It's easy to see how helpful this can be. People frequently get feedback on their performance, which helps them improve; and people regularly get encouragement, which motivates them to work hard. If they are getting rebukes, well that can be a problem and we will tackle it in the next section on how things can go wrong.

Not only does feedback offer the potential to bring day-to-day performance management to life, it can lead to better appraisals as well. Because all that feedback is captured online, at year end the manager has a rich trove of data on which to base a thoughtful appraisal. This is where acknowledgements are particularly useful; if the manager and others are documenting an employee's accomplishments over the year



then that is hugely helpful come appraisal time. It does not make appraisals easy, but it is much better than making judgements based on vague memories of what a person accomplished.

Can it all go wrong?

Feedback should be used as a tool for development & acknowledgement, not as a popularity contest.

It is fair to wonder if enabling feedback with technology might have some drawbacks. The most obvious problem is that people might start using feedback platforms to give rebukes or insensitive “constructive” criticism. The online world is familiar with the damaging effects of ‘flame wars’ where people attack each other online with language they would never use face to face. In a non-anonymous business setting this is less likely, but managers should be alert to the possibility and step in if feedback is causing distress.

A less serious problem is that if people know the feedback will affect appraisals they may try to manipulate the system by getting friendly colleagues to post glowing comments. Attempting to game appraisal systems is inevitable and you have to trust that your managers are savvy enough not to be taken in and to be able to recognize when feedback is not aligned with their own observations. Feedback should be used as a tool for development and acknowledgement, not as a popularity contest.

Measure, communicate, learn, and follow solid processes.

One can never be certain how a new tool or process will work out. The best approach is to try new methods on a modest scale, watch how they are working and tweak as needed. Like any other technology used in the workplace – email, social media, even telephones - using technology for enabling feedback will require specific usage expectation and policies to be drafted and made clear to managers and employees.

Making it all go right

Frequent feedback using technology might be the missing key for performance management.

Feedback is essential, hard, and can be enhanced with technology. How can HR make sure the organization gets the most value from feedback? The tools are familiar ones: measurement, communication, learning, and good processes.

The first thing HR should do is start **measuring** the quality of feedback. The best way to do this is to have questions about feedback built into the employee opinion survey. This can be supported by looking at a random sample of the feedback given in the performance appraisal forms or by doing focus groups to get a deeper sense of how feedback is working in the organization.

The second step is **communication**. Technology makes it easy for people to give feedback, but they need to be encouraged to do so and constantly reminded of its



importance. Effective communication and support 'from-the-top' is essential for the user adoption of any technology regardless of its purpose. The trick is to demonstrate value and deliver results.

The third thing is to **develop learning tools**. People need to understand both the importance of feedback in improving performance and how to overcome the barriers that can make it hard to do well. Learning tools can include everything from traditional courses to YouTube style videos to on-the-job performance aids (such as a mug listing the three most important tips in giving developmental feedback).

The last element is good performance-management **processes**, and these days that means processes supported with technology and processes outlining how the technology should be used. Your feedback plans should be focused on effectively capturing the data but you should also plan on how it will be used to improve performance and engage employees in their roles.

Better feedback can lead to better performance and fairer appraisals. Enabling more frequent feedback with technology might be the missing key for performance management.

This paper was prepared by Creelman Research.



Feedback at your Fingertips

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- Engage managers and employees in performance management
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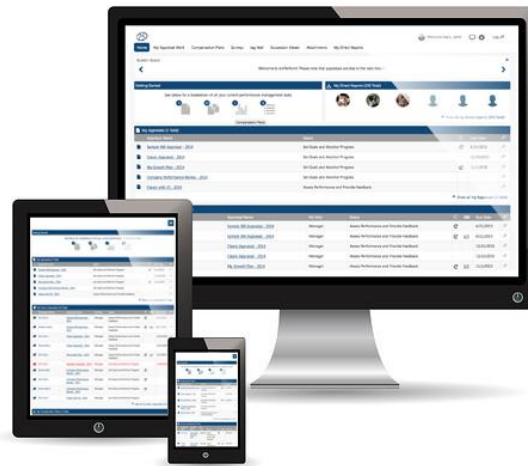
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