



the thiagi group

improving performance playfully

Subjective vs. Evaluative Feedback

Giving Feedback

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Subjective vs. Evaluative Feedback

The other day I shared one of my essays with a friend. She asked to see the essay, so I gave it to her. After she read it, she pointed out a couple of flaws. My immediate reaction was, “What the hell? I didn’t ask for feedback.” I was pretty annoyed.



“My last comment ‘appeared’ to be inviting feedback.
Do not be fooled.”

Turns out, she was right. Her feedback, and the changes I made as a result, improved the essay five times over.

I am a bad example for giving and receiving feedback. (Frankly, I am probably a bad employee in general.) I actually believe that feedback delivery is overblown as a management tool and is often more detrimental than helpful.

Feedback is simply input one receives on past performance. It is an essential requirement for learning. You cannot grow and develop without understanding how well, or how poorly, you just did on a task.

The kind of feedback I do find useful, and like to get, is what I call evaluative feedback: objective data or information from multiple reference points that I can trust to be an accurate reflection of my performance.

Feedback that is delivered to an employee without data or any connection to the task at hand is what I call subjective feedback. This is the type of feedback I see most often in my work as a management consultant (and recoil against).

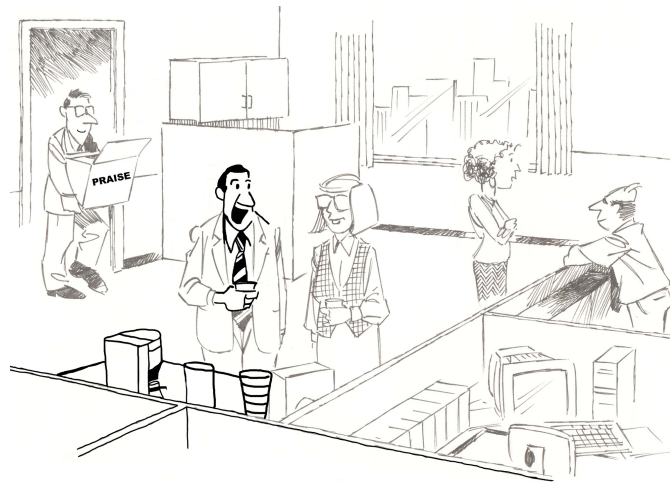
I believe that these are situations when to give feedback:

- ❖ When the employee has missed a goal and is not identifying the issues on his or her own.
- ❖ When the employee is not meeting the requirements and expectations you have clearly stated.
- ❖ When there is information among the employees’ peers that may derail his or her career.
- ❖ When the issue is a performance problem and not merely an irritant.
- ❖ When the employee is about to commit political suicide.

- ❖ These are situations when you should not give feedback:
- ❖ When it is about my ego and not about enabling the employee to succeed.
- ❖ When the employee delivers all goals on time and to the defined quality standards.
- ❖ When there is a lack of supporting data or lack of alignment to the organization's goals.
- ❖ When I am emotional (specifically, angry).

Employees and managers have been indoctrinated in the belief that feedback is critical to good managerial citizenry. They believe that feedback is fundamental to the tasks managers must do in order to perform their job properly.

Employees believe that feedback is the bad-tasting medicine that will ultimately make them better. And, while those managers are right in theory, they are often applying subjective feedback to the process, not evaluative feedback. If there isn't immediate agreement on the feedback between manager and employee because the data and criteria for evaluation are unclear, then the feedback is problematic. Remember, I am not claiming this feedback is bad, just subjective, judgmental feedback.



“I really like how they hand out praise.”

Subjective feedback is rarely differentiated from evaluative feedback. Evaluative feedback is a systematic approach where performance is compared to a set of metrics that are both observable and measurable. Evaluative feedback requires the comparative analysis to be designed appropriately and aligned to the task. If this is done, the employee receives feedback that accurately describes the performance within the context of doing the job.

With subjective feedback, it is a single person's perspective that gathers data from other sources, filters it, and disseminates it. It is the filtration process that makes this feedback subjective and problematic. Subjective feedback hides under the guise of legitimacy.

There can be several problems with feedback:

- ❖ The person delivering the feedback may do so from a motive that is often in conflict with, or at least different from, the growth and development of the employee. The manager may focus on what irritates them or others. Regardless of the political accuracy of this input, it often is disconnected from the actual performance outcome.
- ❖ Feedback is personal. It is about you and your failure. It hurts—even if the information is accurate. Evaluative feedback hurts less because it feels like looking at a problem that needs to be solved. In fact, most people long for evaluative feedback so they can understand how they are doing. It is a critical component when supporting people’s intrinsic motivation to increase their overall competency.
- ❖ Feedback can be perceived as manipulative by the receiver, especially if the receiver doesn’t trust the deliverer. When feedback is disassociated from objective criteria and data, the input is less trustworthy, so the receiver wonders what the ulterior motive may be.
- ❖ Often managers believe positive feedback is intrinsically motivating. This is actually not accurate if the positive feedback is construed as being insincere, inaccurate, disingenuous, or outright controlling. Praise, a synonym to positive feedback, has been wielded so often these days as a reinforcement tool for recognizing good performance that employees no longer perceive it as supportive to their development. In other words, employees no longer trust the source.
- ❖ Feedback focuses on a few specific items for the individual to change or maintain. However, performance results are parts of a system. Feedback may ignore the causes and effects of factors beyond the individual’s ability to control. This is why the evaluative criteria are so essential to get right before the performance gets underway.



- ❖ Feedback can often just be wrong. If it is subjectively determined by a manager, working off subjective input from others, there is no guarantee the information is right. This is especially true when the feedback is about interpersonal performance. It is difficult to develop concrete evaluation criteria for interpersonal dynamics.
- ❖ The manager delivers the feedback from a position of power over the person receiving the feedback. Some managers may like this status relationship. Most employees do not. Even the most caring and benevolent managers have this positional power. And given the hierarchical nature of organizations, it isn't going anywhere. Evaluative feedback methods shrink the status gap created by positional power.
- ❖ The notion of helping is supposed to come from the purest of altruistic places. But the very nature of helping is inherently problematic when offered without invitation. "Helping" in that case implies the person is broken, or something is wrong with them. Feedback may often be patronizing and have an undercurrent of contempt. It is most likely unintentional, but nonetheless present.



"As you know, I've always been behind you."

Here are effective ways to deliver feedback that will help the employee improve:

- ❖ Start by comparing the data with a previously stated goal (one that contains a deliverable, a metric, and a due date). I like to discuss the data with the employee as part of a coaching conversation.
- ❖ Present a problem with the project and work with the employee to find a suitable solution. This avoids the feedback situation entirely.
- ❖ Ask questions to help the employee recognize the issues. Nine out of ten times, the employee will figure out what went wrong. Let the employee deliver the feedback to himself or herself. This permits you to support the employee rather than deliver the bad news.

- ❖ Feedback is cultural. For example, an employee makes a presentation that was well received within the executive culture of a company. If the manager simply says, “Good Job. You hit all the main points. The execs were impressed,” the employee would wonder how the manager knows this. Alternatively, if the manager tells the employee that four out of the five execs found the presentation impressive for x, y, and z reasons and they would like the employee to deliver the same presentation to the Board the following week, then the employee knows that the feedback is based on data from the audience.

When we give feedback we should do it in such a way that we don’t undermine our relationship with the employee or the intrinsic motivation of the employee. Feedback should only be used when you can authentically say you are enabling the employee to succeed.