

Feedback

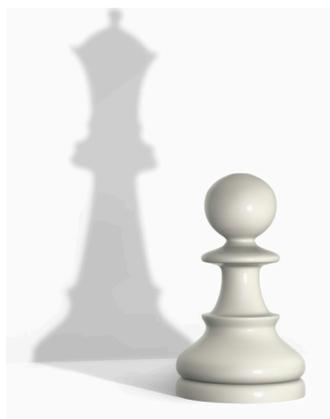
Wouldn't it be great if the people you work with performed just as well as you know they can? If they behaved in a way that really supported your goals? If their method of communicating was crisp, clear and easy to understand? And wouldn't it be great if they all knew what you know about the proper way to do things?

But let's face it – we often have an idea of what a proper outcome would be like. However, we are almost just as often proven wrong. It turns out that someone else's way of doing things was just as good, effective, and goal-oriented. And the communication was perhaps clear – it was our capability to understand that was the problem .

The best we can do – and it's crucial that we actually do this – is to share our opinion. Doing this, we continuously improve our work. This is what we call feedback.

Definition of feedback

“Feedback is when we share our opinion with the person in question about behaviour in the past, to influence occurrences of the same behaviour in the future.”





Take it or leave it?

Our definition of feedback is as follows: “Feedback is when we share our opinion with the person in question about behaviour in the past, to influence occurrences of the same behaviour in the future.” This simply means that we provide our opinion on a “take it or leave it” basis. This does not mean that we abdicate our responsibility to correct errors and inappropriate behaviour. We still need to do this, especially if we are managers or project managers.

Directing people’s behaviour, however, is not feedback

Instead, our definition helps us shift focus. Feedback is something that everybody should give and receive. If you are interested in developing yourself – demand feedback. If you are interested in developing results through other people – share your feedback. Managers (or project managers), however, are accountable for the outcome of the work. In addition, they usually have some means of power, e.g. the authority to reward and punish people.

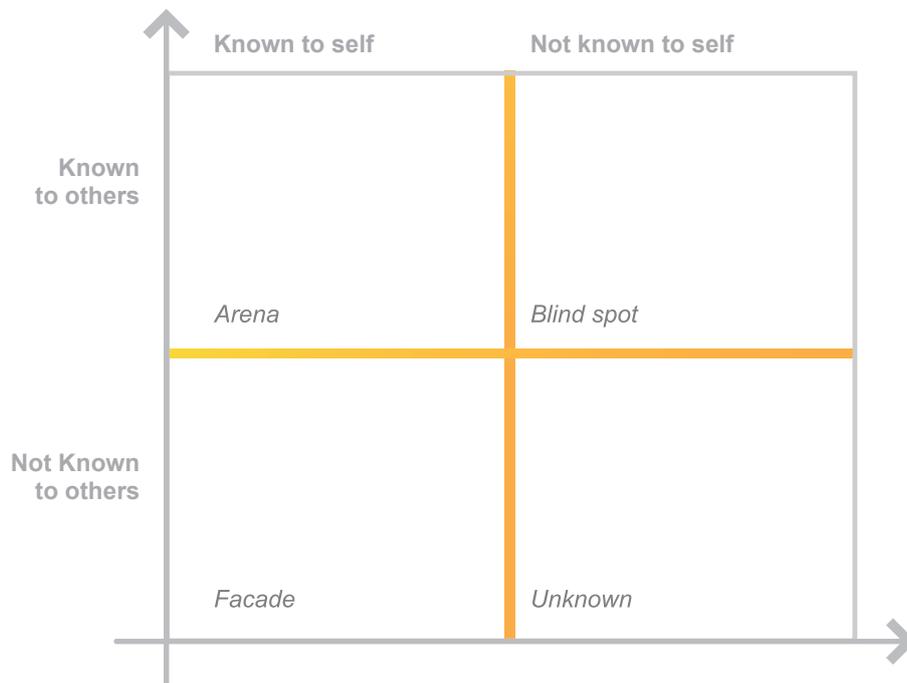
Praise or reward?

So when should we recognise a certain behaviour, and when should we reward it? The short answer is that we should recognise (or praise) the effort and reward the results. If a person volunteers to work overtime to meet a deadline, this should be recognised – unless of course the need to work overtime is caused by poor planning from the person. Let’s assume that (thanks to the person working overtime) the project meets the deadline and becomes a great success. Then this could be rewarded (a bonus, a raise, promotion). On the contrary, if the person refuses to work overtime even if he or she caused the need for it, the behaviour should be recognised – using criticism. Should the project fail because of this, the person could be punished for it (cancelled bonus, no promotion etc). With this example, we see that we could link behaviour with feedback, and results with rewards and possible punishment.

Feedback and self-awareness

In 1955, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham developed a model known as JoHari window. The model is a four square matrix with the variables known/not known to self, and known/not known to others. Initially it is intended to promote self-awareness by letting a person choose adjectives from a list that best describes his or her personality. Then team members are given the same list. When comparing the two lists, the adjectives would appear in the different quadrants, according to the variables. Voila, increased self awareness!

Johari window



If we analyse the model, it becomes obvious that in the absence of feedback something strange happens. We see that the only person who needs some vital information is the one unaware of it. By giving feedback, I lower my Façade. By receiving (looking for) feedback, I minimise my Blind spot. As a team widens the Arena step by step, more knowledge about how they perceive each other's behaviour is added. At least in theory this would lead to increased performance if inappropriate behaviour is changed and replaced by more productive behaviour.

Giving effective feedback

When working with feedback, we either want to strengthen a behaviour that is good (we want more of it), or change a behaviour that is not so good (replace it with a more appropriate behaviour). We also would like the person who receives the feedback to want to change. Why? Because he or she will then be the driving force in this change. If this desire to change comes from within themselves and they truly want it, odds are they will do it.

To make this easy for the recipient, the feedback should follow some guidelines. First of all, feedback must be prepared. If we are the manager responsible for annual appraisal discussions, this is quite obvious. But even in everyday feedback conversations, we must prepare ourselves. This, however, does not mean we need to make it more difficult than necessary. Sometimes all we need to do is take a deep breath and reflect for a second. Then follow the guidelines below:

Aim for improvement

The purpose of feedback is to develop a person, or a person's behaviour. Feedback is not a way to get revenge at people. For instance, if you made negative remarks concerning my work last week, I might feel the need to "get even" by finding flaws in your work. On the other hand, if I feel that the other person really nice, always commenting my work in positive terms, I might feel the need to be nice back. For better or worse, all this is part of human behaviour – but it is not proper feedback.

Be specific

By being specific, we make our feedback concrete. If we express ourselves too generally we might create misunderstanding and uncertainty.

Focus on behaviour

We focus on behaviour and performance, not personalities, i.e. what the person did rather than who he/she is. The behaviour must also be something that the recipient actually can change or strengthen.

Be descriptive

We give feedback based on observable behaviour rather than judgements.

Right time

The right time for feedback is, usually, as soon as a person is receptive. The longer we wait, the less they will care. If we act while a situation or behaviour is still fresh in their memory, they can compare our feedback with their own opinion, and if the perspectives match we might have a good chance of success. The longer we wait, the more awkward we will feel ourselves. This could even lead to a response like “why do you bring that up now”?

Right place

Feedback should normally be given face to face. Sometimes praise might be given in public, but again, that would be a reward rather than feedback. Of course, if we know that the recipient likes being in the centre of attention, we can give public praise. What about the location then? We must be aware of how this might affect the person. If I am a senior manager, whatever criticism I share will have impact. If I do it in my own office, it will have even more impact. Sometimes this is good, and sometimes it isn't. If I really think the person should change or strengthen a certain behaviour, using my “home turf” will add a little extra authority to my words. On the contrary, the recipient might feel threatened by the feedback and walk away wondering whether they risk losing their job.

Right amount

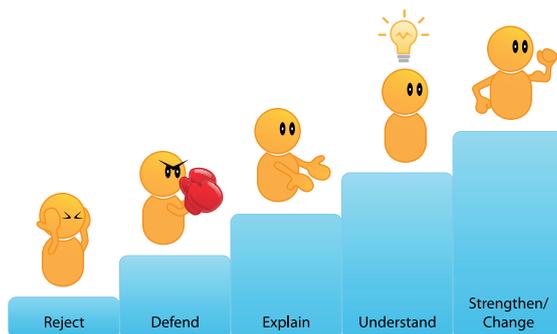
The easiest way of observing this criterion is to make feedback a process rather than an event. As soon as we have feedback, we share it, thus avoiding ending up with a long list of behaviour that we feel needs adjusting. Another question regarding the amount of feedback is how much behaviour can we change at one time? The answer is, less than we usually think. It is a good idea to work with one thing at a time, giving positive feedback/praise when we see a change. When we see that this change is in place, we move on to the next thing.

Be personal about it

Simply use “I” unless you are appointed a spokesperson for a collective or the company. Firstly, because it is your feedback. Secondly, if we hide behind a “we”, “one” or “everybody” the recipient's focus will shift away from behaviour in to who the sender is.

Receiving effective feedback

Whenever we are given feedback, we should receive it as if it was given according to the criteria above. Even if it is poorly formulated, let's assume it comes from a desire to help us develop. This means we listen without prejudice, and we analyse what it would be like should we follow the feedback. If it makes sense, we can do more of the same if it was positive. If we receive criticism, we could change if we believe it is possible. If we don't understand the feedback, we must ask. However, this does not mean that we question the feedback itself, we merely try to help the sender clarify. The receiver's view becomes clearer if we look at the picture below:



Feedback must be presented in such a way that the receiver understands the feedback, why it is important, and perhaps what to do instead. If this is clear to the receiver, and he/she is able to, the receiver could either strengthen the behaviour or change it. If the result of the feedback is related to the three lower steps, something has gone wrong. Maybe there was too much at the same time? Maybe it was given too late? Maybe the feedback was presented in too broad terms, which confused the receiver? Every time we notice that feedback does not fulfil its purpose, we can analyse it using the guidelines and the feedback steps, to make it better next time.



Action

We now have the guidelines and the understanding of how feedback is best received. So let's look at some practical examples.

"Hello Jack, good to see you! Look, I noticed how you stayed and cleared out our messy meeting room yesterday. That was really great of you, especially since Emma and Martin are new, and I believe you showed them a good example of how we try to do things".

In this example, we describe the situation, we make sure the receiver understands the behaviour was good, and we explain why it was good.

Here is another example:

"Helen, yesterday you forwarded me two FYI e-mails. I don't really see why I needed that information. Could you please add information on why you are forwarding e-mails to me in the future?"

We are specific, we are clear, and in this example, we also help the receiver use the feedback by adding some advice.

If feedback was always given according to our examples, it would be easy for the receiver to either do more of the same, or change his or her behaviour.

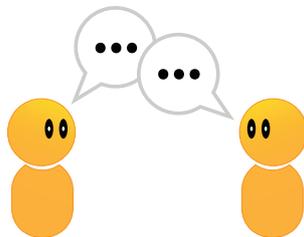
Feedback dialogue

It is always a good idea to ask the receiver how he or she interpreted the feedback. Sometimes the discussion will lead to the receiver explaining why he/she behaved in a certain way. Remember that the purpose of feedback is not to get explanations, so when you have listened, check for applications of the feedback. What will the person do in the future? Is there a possibility for change?

Sometimes we want to make sure that the feedback really sticks, and that it leads to action. In these cases we can expand the feedback into a dialogue. This is especially good if we are managers, experts, mentors or when we are given the task to introduce a person to a new way of doing things. It is also a great way to make sure that a person starts to analyse their behaviour and starts "giving feedback to themselves".

A feedback dialogue consist of three steps –

1. A coaching approach in the beginning
2. Clear feedback in the middle
3. A demand for concrete action in the end or we wrap it up with some advice, both of which is to help the receiver to put the feedback into action



Dialogue

We start the dialogue by stating the purpose, and doing this we make sure the person is ready and has time to listen.

“Hello John! You have been running your project for three weeks now, and I have some feedback I’d like to share. Do you have a minute?”

Hopefully, we will get a “yes”. If not, we simply have to schedule another meeting. We then start with a coaching approach. This means that we use mainly questions to guide the receiver through analysing, in this case, the start of this project. A great way to start is to break the ice with a neutral, open question:

“So, three weeks. How does it feel?”

This will get the person started. Usually we start talking, as we organise our thoughts. When you feel that you’ve broken the ice and the communication has started, steer the dialogue towards the things that the person feels most satisfied with:

“What have been your greatest achievements so far?”

Then use follow up questions to make the person realise how these achievements could be used further, or find other application of the behaviour.

“That sounds great. How could you use that in other projects?”

When you feel that you’ve drawn the major conclusions regarding the things that went well – move on to what could be improved.

“OK. If you could start all over again – what would you do differently?”

And continue with follow up questions to help the person draw the right conclusions from this:

“I see. But if this would happen again, what would you do then?”

When this is exhausted – summarise the dialogue this far.

“Good to hear. To conclude – you are satisfied with (...), and not too happy with (...) is that correct?”

The reason we start with this coaching approach, is to get the person to continuously evaluate him or herself. And if they find good use of their skills, or ways to avoid running into problems in the future, it is far better than you telling them.

However, now it is time to deliver your feedback. You are well prepared and will give feedback according to the guidelines above:

“As I see it, (2-4 positive points) was great. In my opinion you could improve (1-2 negative points)”

Try to limit your feedback to the most crucial negative points, since a person is not likely to be able to change too much at the same time. Make a clear distinction between the positive and negative parts, no “story-telling” with jumps between the positive and what could be improved.

To wrap up the dialogue, we could give some advice (first we describe what is most crucial to improve, and then tell them how this could be achieved). Another way to wrap it up is to make an action plan together with the receiver of the feedback.

“So, in conclusion – I think you should make (...) your top priority. This is best done by (...).”

In short:

1. The purpose of the dialogue
2. Begin with an open, neutral question
3. Steer toward the positive points – use follow up questions
4. Steer toward what could improve – use follow up questions
5. Summarise
6. Deliver your feedback – well prepared
7. Conclude with advice or make an action plan

This way of conducting a feedback session in dialogue works especially well when we create a culture of continuous improvement. The dialogue could also be scaled up and down time wise – it could be a brief five minute evaluation just to check up on something, as well as a framework for an appraisal discussion.



Develop your organisation

As we have seen, feedback is a great tool to build motivation and develop people – yourself as well as others.

If your organisation is not in the habit of using feedback, however, it is best to start out small. Begin with praise, and focus the praise on things that are not too sensitive. Give praise every now and then, just to make people comfortable with it. Then give praise focusing on personal behaviour, cooperation, willingness to help, loyalty etc. When this feels natural and not threatening (and they do not question your motives) move to the next step. Expand your feedback to constructive criticism. Again, start by giving feedback on non-sensitive issues for some time. Then move on to personal behaviour. But remember – be specific, descriptive, deliver feedback at the right time, the right place and deliver the right amount. And remember to aim for improvement.

Finally – the best way to incorporate feedback in the organisation is to be a good role model. Ask for feedback, and when it is given, remember to listen, reflect and if possible use it.