

Formal and informal feedback | 8.1

Feedback is a process of observing and then commenting on people's behaviours and skills in order to maintain or improve their performance. Feedback in organisations can be managed in two ways.

Formally

Many organisations have a formal process of performance review or appraisal. This often takes place on a regular basis (for example, annually). It involves looking at past performance and then setting targets for future performance. It often relates to business objectives but, when well done, can also pay attention to personal preferences and attitudes. Some companies widen the scope of appraisal by introducing a 360° feedback process, in which managers, colleagues and reports all give feedback (often anonymously in writing).

Many managers and their reports complain that such formal feedback is just 'ticking the boxes'. In other words, it is a process they have to follow but do not believe in.

Informally

In this case, people give feedback when they note good or poor performance. For example, you hear a colleague give a good presentation and you comment on this afterwards. Or, you notice a member of your staff has been making mistakes in his work and you ask him what is wrong.

This type of feedback can be much more important for the receiver of the feedback than formal feedback. It is more immediate because it happens soon after the performance that the manager is commenting on. And it shows that managers notice the performance, behaviours, skills and moods of their team members. Feedback given immediately after the action assessed may more often lead to changes in behaviour.

- *I like – with people I work with – to be able to reflect on ourselves once in a*
- *while, not very often but sometimes. And this is an important quality of a team.*
- *If you can look at yourself, see what you've done, clarify things and then go*
- *back to work. This helps me a lot and makes me feel good in a team. So I need*
- *open feedback processes. That's part of my team style.*

■ Torsten Weber (Germany), HLP, Germany

Although national and organisational cultures greatly influence the giving and receiving of feedback, managers should recognise that everybody can profit from feedback of some kind or another. Everyone needs feedback to do better.

Culture and feedback | 8.2

Performance management and the role which feedback has to play in this are a cultural minefield. There are several key cultural dimensions which can affect the nature of the feedback people give and how people receive it.

Task orientation and relationship orientation

Creating a feedback culture may be easier in environments in which organisations are seen as instruments for managing tasks rather than as systems of social relationships. Some organisational and national or ethnic cultures encourage very task-oriented behaviour. This means that people are expected to be very focused and specific about what they are doing. They need to know the what, the where, the why and the how. Managers expect employees to perform tasks to a high standard as long as they clearly understand what they have to do.

In these types of culture, people often only give feedback when something goes wrong. Having everything going right is the norm so there is no need to comment positively on it.

On the other hand, people in organisational cultures which are less task-oriented but more focused on relationships tend to do things for other reasons as well: because they want to be cooperative, or to show integrity, or because they are friends with their colleagues or feel loyal to their organisation. Of course, they need to understand the specifics of the task too. They will do it well if they want to and these more personal, relationship-related factors are key.

In these types of culture, there is often a need for supportive or encouraging feedback and you have to be careful about giving critical feedback as it may easily offend people.

Communication orientation

In cultures which prefer direct communication (see Chapter 2), people tend to be more prepared to give and receive feedback. They may be happy to receive positive feedback in a group or in front of their colleagues. They may be more willing to receive critical feedback on a one-to-one basis.

In cultures where people communicate less directly, it can be more difficult to give or receive direct feedback. It may be necessary to speak to people on a one-to-one basis to find out what they are thinking. Even this will not be a transparent process without trust and understanding between you.

- *If you travel to North America, they may give much more direct feedback than*
- *anywhere else in the world. If you are not used to it, then you could sense it as*
- *rather hostile or aggressive. In Asia you have the complete opposite.*
- Ulrich Hansen (Germany), Henkel, Germany

Power orientation

The giving and receiving of feedback – especially 360 degree feedback – may depend on a relationship between the giver and receiver which allows



dialogue to take place on more or less equal terms. The power difference between the two parties may need to be relatively small.

Group-orientation – individualism

Giving feedback as practised in, say, British and US organisations, is based on the belief that performance is the result of individual effort and that individuals can be held responsible for good or bad performance. This may clash with group-oriented notions of responsibility in other cultures.

Face and feedback | 8.3

A very significant influencing factor in more group-oriented cultures is the concept of face. The need to protect face is important for all members of the group. A person can lose face as a result of losing his or her temper, confronting an individual, acting in an arrogant manner or failing to show appropriate respect.

What does the concept of face mean in practice?

- Relationships are long-term and need to be cultivated. This means that you cannot afford to have serious conflicts with someone in your in-group.
- The reputation of your family and colleagues can be affected positively or negatively by your own reputation. Criticism is therefore not just a matter of an individual accepting and learning from it. The criticism can be seen to affect other people.
- There is a commonly held fear of standing out from the group, of not fitting in or of being criticised, ridiculed or reprimanded in public. This means that you need to be careful about focusing on individuals either for praise or criticism.

- ***You can never ever surprise or embarrass a Baltic manager in a meeting in front of his colleagues because then he's lost. And that's part of the culture.***

■ Erik Hallberg (Sweden), TeliaSonera, Sweden

Personality and feedback | 8.4

Feedback is also a very personal issue. Most people are sensitive about receiving critical feedback. Some people are suspicious about receiving positive feedback.

Sincerity

People need to feel the feedback they receive is sincere. The more introverted their preferred behaviour is, the more sensitive they may be about feedback. Extroverts often accept feedback at face value – it could be that the feedback is superficial but that does not matter. More introverted people find superficial feedback insincere and may well only welcome feedback which is properly considered. The best way of making sure this happens is to get the receiver of the feedback to reflect upon his or her own performance.

Self-reflection

The starting point for much personal development is self-reflection – holding the mirror up to ourselves. We need to see ourselves clearly and also through the eyes of others. The person giving the feedback has a vital role in helping us to see the gap between where we are and where we want to be and also taking action to get there.

The manager who is skilled in the feedback process will rarely just say “That was good. I like the way you presented the issue” or “That could have been better. I thought you should have been better prepared.” He/she will ask the team member “How did you think that went?” or “What do you think went well?”

In this way, the feedback comes from self-reflection and is much more powerful and much more likely to lead to change.

Types of feedback | 8.5

- ***Q: Can we start with a basic question? What is feedback exactly?***
- ***A: For me, you give feedback when you want someone to develop, to be better. But it's only on behaviour, not personality. And if you want to***
- ***give feedback, you have to check if the person really can change it or not,***
- ***if it really is a behaviour.***

■ Dani Stromberg (Sweden), management consultant, Sweden

There are two types of feedback used for increasing the performance of teams and individuals.

Affirmative feedback

In this case, the manager observes a team member contributing to the success of the team. This may be because of the quality of work on a certain task or it could be through hard work and dedication over time. It is important to follow these steps:

Three-step affirmative feedback

- 1 Say what you have observed.
- *I've noticed how hard you have been working these last few weeks.*
- 2 Say what effect this behaviour has.
- *This has meant that we have reached some demanding deadlines.*
- 3 Show appreciation and encouragement.
- *Thank you for all your efforts. Your work is really making a difference.*

Clearly, you can give affirmative feedback to the team as well as to individuals.

