Motivate with Feedback

Build your business by building up your employees

If you want to see the effect of feedback, look at a child. Imagine the excited four-year-old who runs to her father to show off her most recent artistic achievement. If you speak harshly, discussing the need to color within the lines and use the correct colors, you will see a child's smile fade, enthusiasm will wane, and she will not be as likely to come running to show off her work in the future.

If, however, you tell her what a beautiful picture she has made and show her how if she colors slowly she can stay in the lines you will see a smile broaden as she runs off to create an even more beautiful masterpiece for her father.

Feedback with employees has the same effect; it will either build an employee up or decimate their spirit.

Feedback Defined

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, feedback in interpersonal relations may be defined as, *"the return to the point of origin of evaluative or corrective information about an action or process."*

In their book *The Art of Managing People*, Phillip Hunsaker and Tony Alessandra point out that you are using feedback whenever you *"verbally, vocally, or visibly react to what another person says or does."*

In his book, *Management Decisions by Objectives*, George Ordiorne said effective feedback *"not only measures but steers."*

This reminds me of a story a military friend of mine told me. I had asked how the navy's ship to shore missiles, which are often fired fifty miles away, could land within a few feet of their

targets. He described the computer brain of the missile comparing where the missile is, with where it is supposed to go, and then adjusting the course of the missile. Amazingly, this feedback and adjustment process occurs 1000's of times each second!

Feedback needs to be frequent and designed to improve desired performance. Combine this thought with the Alessandra/Hunsaker definition to get a more complete definition of feedback for business: "*Verbal, vocal, and visible feedback to superiors, peers, or employees must be timely, and designed to "steer" them to improved levels of performance.*"

Types of Feedback

There are two types of feedback; verbal, and non-verbal.

Verbal. Verbal feedback is that which transmits information through words. It includes spoken and written communication. A component of verbal feedback is vocal quality. From *The Art of Managing People*, Alessandra and Hunsaker identify seven common voice qualities; resonance, rhythm, speed, pitch, volume, inflection, and clarity. Think of verbal feedback as the *words* and the vocal quality as the *feelings*.

Non-Verbal. Non-Verbal or visible feedback is that which is transmitted using body language: the eyes, head, face, arms, and legs.

Feedback as A Motivational Tool

Remember Mr. Maslow and his hierarchy of needs? In his book, *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow described five levels of needs; physiological (food, shelter), safety (security, stability), love (affection, affiliation), esteem (self-respect, achievement), and self-actualization (self-fulfillment).

Feedback to a boss, to a peer, or to a subordinate can help motivate them because it helps fulfill their need for safety, love, esteem, and/or self-actualization. To a new employee or an employee assigned to a new job, feedback can be a significant security builder. To an employee 1,000's of miles from family and friends, feedback can help provide a sense of affiliation, of being part of a group. To young, old, new, or experienced employees, feedback can be a powerful motivator as a builder of self-esteem. Finally, to the employee developing his skill levels, feedback can provide the motivation to continue to stretch, to become all that his skills will allow.

Constructive Feedback

All feedback should be constructive. It should be given to improve performance/behavior, or it should commend good performance/behavior. It should be done in such a way that the employee is motivated to improve performance or continue to do excellent work.

Paul emphasized this point in Romans 15:1, *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbor for his good, to build him up."*

Since feedback can clearly influence employee behavior in four of the five levels of needs that Maslow described, it behooves us as managers to develop our ability to provide feedback that matches the needs of the individual. If you have ever had the pleasure of working for someone who has developed this management skill you know what I mean. These are the bosses who seem to know just what to say to each employee. They know when a smile is needed, an encouraging word, or a swift kick. You leave a meeting with this type of person, or finish reading a memo from them and are ready to take on the world all over again.

Getting Started

Knowing that there are two types of feedback, here are eight guidelines to help you develop and use your feedback skills more effectively:

1) Use Common Definitions and Simple Language

Make sure that you are using common definitions. Even the simplest words in our vocabulary have multiple meanings; in England, a bonnet is a car hood, and a boot is a car trunk. In the eastern US, a "PB & J" is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. In Cincinnati, Ohio chili is a curious blend of spaghetti noodles, and a sauce made with meat, cinnamon, and chocolate!

The more complicated your vocabulary, the more likely misunderstandings will occur. Be specific, be concise, and use simple terms to increase the effectiveness of your communication.

2) Avoid the Use of Garbage Words and Slang

Consider how these examples of garbage words can add confusion to a conversation:

Hmm. Expressed as a question "hmm?" can mean that you want a statement repeated because you didn't hear clearly, or that you didn't understand the statement and you want clarification. Expressed as a statement and combined with a nod of the head "hmm" can mean understanding, or express sympathy. Squint your eyes a little, say "hmm," and you can express great contemplation.

Uh-huh. Whenever the speaker takes a breath, and you want to let them know that you're still breathing, you say "uh-huh." Said loudly with a smile you mean excitement, said quietly with a nodding head, boredom.

Grunts and Groans. Some people develop the grunts and groans category into an art form. There are grunts and groans to express surprise, happiness, and sadness. In fact, if there is a human emotion the grunts and groan artists have a sound to express it.

3) Be Observant

People usually use a fairly consistent set of verbal and non-verbal cues. I had one boss who was so tuned in to me that he could see the wheels turning in my head, and knew when I didn't agree or when I had an idea. He said he could tell when I was thinking something over by my facial expressions, and when I had something to say because my posture changed. He was rarely wrong.

4) Behavior Versus the Person

Remember that the purpose of feedback is to improve employee productivity. Therefore, feedback for behavior that needs correction should be focused on the behavior, not the individual. The feedback that reinforces behavior can focus on both the individual and the work.

Jesus gives us an excellent example of providing feedback for the behavior rather than the individual in Matthew 26. The Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus when Peter boldly stepped forward and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus said, *"Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52)."*

Given the intensity of the situation would you have said, "Peter, you idiot! What do you think you are doing?" Jesus however, healed the servant and taught the entire crowd an important lesson about the use of violence.

5) Feedback Timing

The ship to shore missile mentioned previously would be worthless if the "feedback" to correct the course to target came every five minutes.

Likewise, feedback to reinforce or correct employee behavior is best when given as soon as possible. Don't wait to give an employee praise for a great job done on a project until the next formal review period. Tell them now! And for goodness sakes don't put off feedback to correct behavior, or you'll likely see poor performance repeated.

Luke 19 provides an example of prompt feedback. The day after Jesus re-entered Jerusalem he went to the temple and found men selling. He did not put the matter on the agenda for the next disciples meeting. He immediately overturned the money changers tables and drove them out of the temple. As they departed, he said, *"My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a 'den of robbers' (Luke 19:46)."*

6) Spoken Versus Written

If the feedback you are giving is corrective, it should be verbal and in private. To make sure that future expectations of performance are very clear you should follow-up in writing.

If the feedback is a commendation of good work, you should do four things:

- tell the person you recognize and appreciate the good work,
- follow-up with a written note reinforcing your praise,
- forward the note to peers, and
- forward the note to superiors.

Verbal praise for a job well done is nice, but the feeling usually fades after a few days. Written praise is more concrete, and it gives you the opportunity to publicize the employees' success. Copy the written praise to the peer group and upper management. There's nothing quite like getting a personal note from a senior manager who expresses appreciation for good work as a motivational tool.

7) Don't Assume Understanding

Do you remember the phrase, "I know you think you understand what I said, but I'm not so sure that what you heard I what I meant?" People often nod agreement or say "I know exactly how you feel," without really knowing how the other person feels, what frame of reference they're coming from, etc. Use your communications skills to ensure that what you think you heard is what the other person meant to say!

At any point in a conversation asking questions is the best way to make sure that you heard correctly. For example, in a meeting situation, someone makes a statement that is not correct. Make a statement to the group, "*Many of us* may have faced this situation…" and go on to provide the correct information.

The feedback that is being provided to reinforce behavior is multiplied by the number of ears which hear it. So, the next time you have a meeting make a point of complimenting specific people for specific actions that they have taken. Public thanks for a job well done will guarantee redoubled efforts. An important side benefit is that others in the room who hear this praise will also work hard to earn their moment in the spotlight.

8) Sincerity

Contrary to popular belief flattery will not get you everywhere. People very quickly see through insincere remarks. Always provide feedback that is sincere. Praise earned for hard work will always motivate more than the hollow flattery of praise for work that the employee knows is not up to standard.

One Final Thought

Feedback is like a powerful sports car, it is a pleasure to drive, but in the hands of a drunk, it is a lethal weapon.

Before you fire off that next missile chastising an employee, before you bring him or her into your office for a thorough tongue lashing, remember the purpose of feedback is to motivate the employee to improve performance. Employees will want to learn how to do a better job and will be motivated to do better if the feedback they receive from you is always timely, balanced, and constructive.