



Employee Performance Solutions

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Three Keys to Reducing Defensive Reactions to Feedback

By Jamie Resker

When it comes to developing talent providing quality feedback is the most underutilized "tool" in any manager's toolkit. Because of the typical difficulties associated with such discussions many managers avoid or mishandle this basic responsibility. *However*, there is a way to deliver feedback that has a better chance of the employee acknowledging the area for development: The Performance Continuum Feedback® Method approach.

Three Keys to Reducing Defensive Reactions to Feedback

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Most of us would rather have a root canal (without the Novocain) than give an employee feedback about poor performance, particularly when it relates to a behavior based issue. Yet, we will eagerly discuss, or more accurately complain about, these issues to colleagues, friends or family. So what stops us from providing feedback to the employee?

Clearly, identifying the performance issue isn't the roadblock. Ask any group of co-workers or managers what the problem is with a particular employee and they usually can describe it without hesitation:

- "You, mean Mr. Know-It-All? If he would ask for help instead of pretending he knows how to do everything maybe he would meet his deadlines."
- "She stresses about everything and gets everyone else worked up too."
- "She's an excuse expert."
- "He clams up during meetings and withholds information from the team".
- "Oh, he will promise you anything, just don't hold your breath waiting."

So, why do many managers steer clear of challenging performance conversations?

WHY MANAGERS AVOID GIVING DIFFICULT FEEDBACK

Over the years we have heard many reasons for why managers avoid or delay providing feedback. Here are some of the more common reasons:

- I don't know what to say.
- Overall the employee is really good, so I don't want to bring up this one issue...it's easier to just let it go.
- The employee is due to retire in two years anyway.
- I'm worried about the employee's reaction.
- What if I make things worse?
- This person has been here a long time and who am I to bring up the performance issue?
- What about legal ramifications?
- It will demotivate the employee.
- I hate conflict.
- Maybe the problem will fix itself.
- I don't think the employee is capable of changing.
- We're the kind of organization that just wants to be nice to everyone- we avoid conflict whenever possible.
- What if the person gets upset and resigns?
- I don't know what the solution to this performance issue is.
- The employee should be aware of this isn't- I mean, isn't it obvious!

Even the most seasoned managers can come up with a million excuses for avoiding or putting off a difficult performance conversation. We believe the problem lies more with the method traditionally used to provide feedback than with some shortcoming of the individual responsible

for orchestrating the performance conversation.

THE TRADITIONAL METHOD OF PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK AND WHY IT DOESN'T WORK

The traditional method in which managers provide performance feedback to employees, usually referred to as “constructive criticism”, is often the very reason they avoid, water down or delay giving feedback in the first place.

The traditional method of providing performance feedback would sound something like this:

“John, we need to talk about how things are going. You made some careless errors on the last several reports you handed in. You factored in the production labor costs incorrectly. I had to get other staff to rerun the numbers and as a result Tammy had to drop her own work to fix the mistakes you made. Now I feel I need to go through your month end reports with a fine tooth comb before I pass them onto the CFO, etc....”.

Or

“Ann, we need to have a discussion to clarify your role and responsibilities. I've noticed the following issues: You are missing deadlines, not keeping people in the loop when deadlines are not going to be met and not demonstrating a sense of urgency to get the press releases out on time. From my perspective it appears that you don't have good time management skills based on not accomplishing key tasks within specified timeframes. On top of all this your attitude seems really lax when you do miss deadlines. What is going on with you?...”

In the previous examples all of what the managers have said is for the most part accurate. Most managers have been taught to create a bullet-proof case revolving around a list of the employee's shortcomings. After all, you have to prove to the employee that they are underperforming. Is it any wonder that most feedback recipients get defensive and feedback providers find difficulty in achieving anything remotely resembling a productive outcome, never mind gaining agreement on what needs to change?

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE EMPLOYEE

Can you think back to a time when a manager talked to you about a performance issue and did so without any finesse at all? From the employee's perspective when their manager

does initiate a performance discussion it can come across as finger pointing, fault finding and disciplinary. Poorly crafted and delivered messages can trigger feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness for the employee. This is particularly true if this is the first time the employee is hearing the information. The traditional approach to giving feedback often comes across in a harsh, “this is what is wrong with you” tone.

Once employees are confronted with this type of information the natural response is to blame others, fixate on the details, make excuses, try to explain why the feedback is incorrect, etc. All of this adds up to an uncomfortable and often confrontational exchange between the manager and employee. Once a manager has been through this process once or twice it becomes easier to just avoid addressing employee performance issues altogether. Let's just say there is no real mystery for why managers tend to steer clear of giving feedback and why employees don't like being on the receiving end! The fact of the matter is that there's a better way to introduce feedback to employees.

3 KEYS TO REDUCING DEFENSIVE REACTIONS TO FEEDBACK

It is clear that the key reason managers avoid giving feedback is not because they don't understand the problem but rather because they don't know how to craft a message that is “sayable” and “hearable.” The Performance Continuum Feedback® Method (PCFM) is a straight forward approach to do just that.

The PCFM helps you put the focus on the positive desired performance rather than highlighting the current negative performance. The result is a message that managers can deliver comfortably and with greater confidence that employee will remain open to hearing the information as opposed to reacting self protectively.

Key #1: Identify the Performance Issue

Identify the negative behavior that is holding the individual back – not a problem for most people. Then describe it in the opposite, positive terms.

For example, if the employee lacks finesse when dealing with clients and behaves like a “bull in a china shop” the manager would ask

the employee to *develop a more polished and professional style*.

For an employee that makes frequent mistakes, the manager would talk in terms of *developing more accuracy*.

For the employee who chronically complains that everything is a problem but never offers any solutions, the manager might ask the employee to *develop a problem solving approach*.

Key #2: Be Specific about the Desired Change

It is important to get specific about what you mean by a “more polished and professional approach”, “more accuracy” or a “problem solving approach”. For example, “What I mean by ‘develop a problem solving approach’ is that when you first notice a problem that is preventing you from getting your job done I want you to first think through a solution and then approach me if it's something you need my help with”.

Key #3: Detail the Benefits of Making the Change

Lastly, it is useful to explain to the employee the benefit of developing the performance area. First, ask yourself “What problems does this performance cause”?

In the case of the chronic complainer who never offers solutions, their behavior most likely creates negativity, wastes time and garners complaints from co-workers who are sick and tired of listening to this person drone on about what's wrong.

So, the “here's why I'm asking you to focus on this” part of the message would sound something like this. “The reason I want you to focus on solving problems is that people will

notice and appreciate your can do approach This will make more constructive use of the time we have and it will bring more positive energy into the team”.

Notice how the message is still honest yet talks in terms of what WILL happen when the employee develops a problem solving approach.

These keys represent some of the core concepts of the Performance Continuum Feedback® Method, a step-by-step methodology designed to make anyone comfortable delivering even the most difficult feedback.

CONCLUSION

Talking in terms of the desired performance versus the current undesired performance serves two purposes:

1. We are more likely to initiate the discussion because the wording makes it more comfortable to deliver the feedback.
2. The employee learns what *is* expected (as opposed to focusing on what's wrong) and their self-esteem is left intact.

Bypassing negative performance descriptions and the resulting negative employee reaction allows the employee to respond more positively; ultimately facilitating the move towards the solution phase of the discussion – the ultimate goal of providing feedback in the first place.

A simple rule of thumb is to provide the employee with at least two opportunities to receive the feedback and make progress on the issue. Only when it becomes clear that the employee is unwilling or unable to make progress should more extreme measures be used - such as disciplinary action or documented performance plans.

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