



# Unit 2

## Characteristics of Effective Feedback

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Use descriptive language in delivering feedback
- ✓ Describe six characteristics of effective feedback
- ✓ Provide feedback in real situations

## Unit 2

### Characteristics of Effective Feedback

#### Six Characteristics

One goal of feedback is for it to contribute to an improvement in future performance. Even when it does not lead to a desired level of performance, the meeting itself provides the platform to discuss expectations, results, motivation, and how to succeed. For employees (or even suppliers) who choose not to perform at an adequate level, the meeting serves as a benchmark within the larger performance management arena. If an employee refuses to comply, has been supported and coached to do well, and continues to refuse, then the supervisor has the necessary means to move into a disciplinary performance management plan.

When feedback is perceived to be negative (because of our own behavior, or perhaps because it is not well delivered), people will naturally try to avoid it, or at least minimize the negative effects. However, we need to let people know that it can be a great tool for personal development, especially when we include information on both the issues and the possible solutions. With this in mind, let's delve deeper into the six major characteristics of effective feedback.

#### In Private

Feedback should be given in private if your comments can be embarrassing, and a formal feedback meeting should always be held in private. While some people like the attention that comes from sincere praise or celebrating an accomplishment in front of others, some do not, and no one wants negativity shared in front of their peers. (This should be apparent without having to state it, but sometimes we get excited and forget!)

#### Balanced

Balance in this context is about designing the feedback session so that, even though there may be constructive criticism required, the employee does not feel attacked, or that all you have to say about his work is negative. We recommend that you avoid the older form of "sandwich approach" (by making a positive comment, a negative, and then a positive). However, you should still start any feedback with a positive comment about some aspect of the employee's work. If you are not comfortable with this, or not good at small talk, write some comments down ahead of time to keep yourself focused. Your employee will appreciate that you get to the heart of the meeting quickly instead of letting any anxiety build. Feedback that is delivered in specific terms and in a sincere manner is usually accepted well, even when we are receiving criticism.

## **Relevant**

Keep the conversation focused on feedback that is relevant and job related, and to things which the employee has control over. For example, complaining about the way a letter looks when the employee only has access to an ancient printer that adds lines to everything, or asking for a sophisticated looking brochure when there is no budget provided for the proper paper and licensed photography, only adds to the employee's stress and frustration.

## **Specific**

Avoid general statements when you deliver feedback. "You seem unmotivated," is not nearly as helpful as, "You arrived late to work at least three days a week, your last two assignments were late, and you did not attend the new employee lunch last week."

## **Documented**

Base your comments on documentation, facts, and your own observation. Don't rely on what another manager or a colleague told you, or what someone overheard, when you should be available to monitor what is going on yourself.

## **Personal (In the Right Way)**

Compliments or criticisms that are directed generally toward the team are meaningless to an employee. "We just don't seem able to get out error-free invoices," is not as constructive as, "Three of the last invoices you sent out had errors in them." Describe the behavior that is unsatisfactory, rather than judge a person because of it. Base it on their actions, and don't make a personal attack on the individual.

## **Formal Feedback Framework**

Establishing a formal feedback session is practically the same as any other meeting you will arrange. Here is a helpful framework when providing formal feedback, such as in a performance review or in a sit-down meeting with a supplier or contractor.

## **Set the Time and Place**

Be mindful of other people's expectations (as well as your own) for privacy. No one wants to be criticized in front of their peers, but even if you are offering praise, some people prefer it privately. Any kind of formal performance appraisal, a discussion on expectations, or constructive criticism, needs to be offered privately.

We recommend that you keep this meeting short and focused. There is no need to schedule an hour meeting for something that can be covered in a shorter time. On the other hand, if you expect that the individual will have thoughts to share, make sure you allow ample time for this.

Consider the employee's schedule, too. Don't schedule the meeting thirty minutes before you know they have to go and catch a bus, or right before you have to deliver an important presentation.

### **Prepare Documentation**

If this is a formal performance evaluation, you may have a form that your employer prefers. Otherwise, you need to have data available for the individual to back up what you have to say. Keep in mind that positive data and results are important, too.

### **Start the Meeting**

Keep the tone of the meeting professional and polite. Even if you are upset about something, the meeting needs to be conducted properly. Remember, no one wants to work with a tyrant for an employer. Use the six characteristics of effective feedback during the meeting.

### **Outline the Change or Offer Praise**

After a little small talk, move onto the purpose of the meeting and your feedback. If the feedback is positive, be genuine in your praise. If possible, demonstrate improvement from the last meeting. If changes or improvements are needed, engage in discussion with open questions. Ask the individual for their thoughts on what they can do differently and get the commitment to change. In order to avoid overwhelming the individual, ask them to work on no more than two or three improvements at one time.

Round the conversation out by complimenting them on their positive results (no one does everything poorly), attitude, commitment, and anything else that is suitable.

### **Check for Understanding**

Ask the individual to summarize what you have said so that you know they understand. Watch for people's tendency to focus on negative attributes; ask them to also recap the positives if necessary.

## Follow Up

This is the step that many people miss, but it's an essential part of the feedback framework. If you say that you will follow up with the employee in ten days to check in and see how things are coming along, make sure that you do. Lack of follow up on your part will make it look as though you don't really care about helping the employee to succeed. It will also negatively impact levels of trust and employee engagement.

If you have an employee who is not succeeding despite receiving feedback and coaching from you, and you neglect to follow up with them, it can be perceived that you are condoning the unwanted behavior or that you do not take performance management seriously. If you persistently condone poor or substandard workplace behavior, you make it extremely difficult to move onto disciplinary measures in the future.

## Informal Feedback Framework

Informal feedback will be offered in a way that is very similar to formal feedback, except that you will likely only focus on one topic, and you do not need all that documentation that a performance appraisal or similar formal meeting requires. Data is still helpful however, and appreciated by people who need to have a solid understanding of where you are coming from.

The framework for an informal meeting can look like this:

- Set the time and place (if it is not a spontaneous meeting)
- Start the meeting
- Outline the change or offer praise
- Check for understanding
- Document if appropriate (depending on the nature of the conversation, this may not be required)
- Follow up

## State Your Case

### Instructions

Each of the following situations is one in which you can provide feedback. In your groups, review each example and then come to consensus on whether you will provide feedback that it formal or informal (including the rationale for your choice). Then, if you have decided to provide feedback, prepare at least two constructive feedback statements based on what you have learned so far. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

**Scenario One: Howard the Warehouse Worker**

Howard works in the warehouse and used to have no problem picking all new work orders within 24 hours. However, in the last several months he seems to be spending a lot of time on the phone as he moves about the warehouse, and he is falling behind. Orders are now being filled on average within 30 hours.

**Good Feedback Statements**

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**Poor Feedback Statements**

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**Scenario Two: Task Improvements**

Four months ago you completed formal performance reviews with your ten direct reports. For the most part, things seem to be going quite well. One of your staff has developed a new work process that has helped the team to increase their time for task completion by 4%. This translates to an increased profit of \$75,000 per quarter.

**Good Feedback Statements**

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**Poor Feedback Statements**

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**Scenario Three: Tardy Supplier**

One of your consistent, reliable suppliers has recently changed his delivery times, dropping off building supplies at 4:00 p.m. instead of his previous 7:00 a.m. time. In the last week, you've been unable to supply your own customers on time because of this change in his delivery schedule.

**Good Feedback Statements**

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**Poor Feedback Statements**

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**Scenario Four: The Break Room**

Of the 100 staff working out of your location, most are quite diligent about leaving the break room clean and tidy after they use it. Yesterday and the day before, however, people left their dirty dishes in the sink. You know who the culprits are, since their names are labeled on their lunch containers. You are furious that they would behave this way.

**Good Feedback Statements**

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**Poor Feedback Statements**

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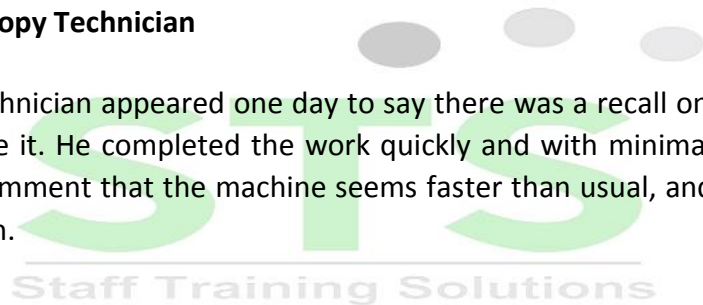
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**Scenario Five: The Copy Technician**

The photocopier technician appeared one day to say there was a recall on a part for your copier and he was going to replace it. He completed the work quickly and with minimal downtime. A few days later, three of the staff comment that the machine seems faster than usual, and that it has not jammed since the technician was in.



**Good Feedback Statements**

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**Poor Feedback Statements**

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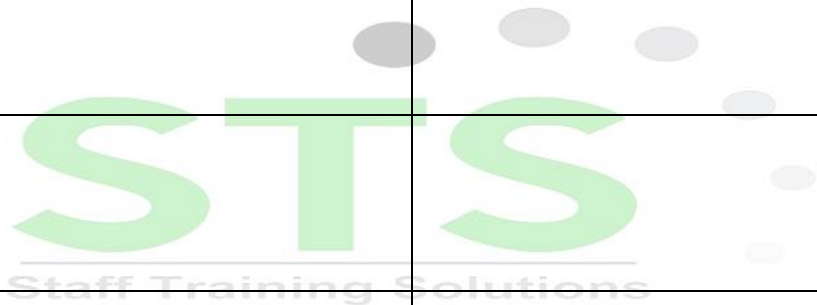
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### Pre-Assignment Review

Review the feedback statements in your pre-assignment. Find ways to improve them by applying the skills that you have learned in the course so far.

Original Statement	Improved Statement



## Receiving Feedback Graciously

Accepting criticism from others can be really difficult. We often hear criticism as a very personal attack on behavior that we already may not be proud of. It helps to think about criticism as feedback and as something to help you improve. This is what we refer to as **positive intent**.

While you may hesitate in doing this, it can be an outstanding opportunity for you to grow. It also means that you are going to follow up a feedback session by asking the other individual if your feedback was helpful, sensitive to their needs, and respectful.

Here are some tips on accepting criticism.

### **Listen attentively.**

Make sure you understand the criticism and what needs improvement. You may even want to paraphrase the other person's remarks.

### **Ask for details.**

Find out as much as you can about the incident(s) described. Ask lots of open ended questions to gather all the information that you can.

### **Find something to agree with.**

You don't need to say that you were wrong if you weren't, but it does do a lot for your own integrity for you to say that you were wrong if you were. Of equal importance, you need to acknowledge the person's right to criticize and to recognize the importance of the person's concerns. If you cannot agree with the other person about any aspect of the criticism being offered, you could be perceived as rejecting the person as well.

### **Try not to take their comments personally.**

If they've learned anything about offering feedback, they will know they need to speak to your behaviors and not your personal self, but not everyone knows this. Consider that they are being brave and offering feedback (not an easy thing for most people to do) as an opportunity to improve yourself.

## Testing the Waters

### **Scenario One**

Amy has worked on your team for ten months. She is an employee who does great work about three days each week, but seems to have trouble producing at the same rate for the entire work week. As a





