



## **Employee Evaluations: What Successful Leaders Do**

By: Kelly Graves "The Corporate Therapist™"

Successful leaders understand the benefit of providing feedback that guides, motivates and involves people. These leaders actively seek out opportunities to build positive communication, trust and meaningful relationships that improve job performance. Giving and receiving regular feedback is a major building-block of an effective, efficient and profitable working relationship. Well thought-out, insightful and, positive feedback delivered in a timely manner will make a significant difference to both the giver and receiver involved in the evaluation process. Discover how incorporating these four steps into your employee evaluation process will positively impact your organizational culture, and as a result, help your business grow in leaps and bounds.

### **I. Leaders Need to Create a Psychologically Safe Workplace.**

The first point to remember when providing specific feedback as part of an employee performance evaluation is to keep it positive and about specific *behaviors*. The person receiving the feedback should never fear humiliation or "loss of face." Negative feedback that is presented without "Verbal Novocain" will automatically trigger defense mechanisms that will distort or in other ways undo the value of the message. Therefore, a wise first step is to focus on specific goals and objectives that will improve the organization, the department and then how the employee can help the department in achieving organizational objectives.

### **II. Leaders and Employees Must Have Constructive Motives and Agree on how these Specific Goals will Positively Impact the Customer.**

Both parties need to buy into the process and keep it positive, respectful, and *results-oriented*. Be specific. The first steps of an evaluation should start with the giver and the receiver discussing the receiver's goals, how these goals will align with the department goals and how the department goals align will align with the organizations goals. The words "value added" need to be a part of each phase of this process. In other words, a direct link should be established between how the employee will add value to the department, how the department will in turn add value to the organization and how the organization will ultimately add value to the customer.

If the conversations you have and work you focus on does not in some major way impact and improve the customers' situation, it probably isn't relevant. The bottom line is that the leader and employee must establish clear goals before any deliberate feedback is delivered.

### **III. Leaders Should Give Feedback that Emphasizes Appreciation and Includes Concrete and Specific Descriptions.**

- The key concept here is specificity. The more the feedback can be anchored in a specific behavior – a behavior that has been observed by the giver and the receiver – the less likely the feedback is to be misunderstood.
- Feedback can emphasize: (1) positive things the subordinate did well, (2) descriptive and non-evaluative information focused only on what the subordinate actually did, or (3) negative things the subordinate did not do well. Most learning theory has shown that the consequences of the three types of information are different. As would be expected, positive feedback is the easiest to learn from and the most pleasant to receive. Positive feedback guides future behavior directly into more of what is already effective.
- Descriptive feedback can be effective, as well, if the subordinate had her/his own clear standards and only needs to know what she/he was observed to have done. Descriptive feedback also forces the giver to clarify the basis of the evaluation and focus the feedback on behaviors that may be more easily “shaped.”
- Negative feedback is often necessary in the feedback process, in order to ensure that certain kinds of behaviors will not be repeated i.e., safety issues. It is also the most problematic, because it is likely to arouse defensiveness and after the fact, one must do “clean-up work.” Negative feedback will often elicit denials and internal “shutting down” from the subordinate. For instance, the subordinate may be nodding in agreement, but behind their “mask” they have mentally and emotionally shut down. Negative feedback will often trigger a *refusal to accept* what may be vital information and in some cases, depending on the relationship and culture, actually cause passive aggressive behavior. Negative feedback does not offer any guidance on what the person should do *instead* of the mistaken behavior. It does not provide a positive replacement behavior or a positive learning direction. For these reasons, consider carefully before giving negative feedback.
- Worrying about being “nice” can influence the delivery of feedback. A major problem in giving feedback is a leader's tendency to want to avoid being critical or hurting a staff person's feelings. We have all experienced giving or receiving criticism that produced defensiveness and other unpleasant reactions.

If a leader really has significant negative information to deliver, information that influences a subordinate's future, for example, then cutting to the chase is very important. The concern in this case should not be about being nice or mean, but instead it should be about whether the leader can be specific and offer alternative *replacement behaviors*. Lack of specificity in a negative evaluation will only put the subordinate in a position of having to guess: (a) what was done "wrong" and (b) what he or she should be doing differently. The key to delivering difficult or corrective feedback is in avoiding vague generalities and being sure to focus on clear, specific behavioral examples that succinctly redirect, refocus, or replace the ineffective, problematic behaviors.

#### **IV. Feedback Should Be Timed to When Both the Employee and the Leader Are Ready.**

- Timing is crucial in terms of making deliberate feedback an *effective tool*. Remember: the receiver's readiness or motivation to learn is the most important criterion for how and when to give feedback.
- Prior to sharing feedback, the giver must think through the potential reactions, feelings, and judgments the receiver might experience.
- The giver must prepare him or herself psychologically to provide helpful information in a helpful way to the receiver. Such preparation may involve training on how to give deliberate feedback.
- It is important that two parties have agreed upon their goals and worked on building some preliminary norms of trusting each other.
- The timing of the feedback must be close enough to the actual observation to enable the receiver to remember the events and relate to the feedback. If the feedback comes too long after the event, the receiver may not remember the situation described and thus deny it. If the feedback comes too soon after the event, the receiver may still be on an emotional high and not be able to hear the feedback, regardless of whether it's positive or negative.

In essence, the most important thing to remember about making employee performance evaluations an effective process for the giver and receiver is that all four steps must be considered together. Only together will they stimulate and facilitate learning. Save yourself and employee time and anxiety by taking time to plan how to discuss the skills, behaviors and actions needed so they are received and understood in a manner most beneficial to both of you and the organization. Done properly, performance evaluations can be an enjoyable, valuable and profitable experience for everyone.