

Feedback – how well do your staff deal with it?

One of the most common questions I am asked when running a management development workshop is "how do I give difficult feedback constructively?" I wish that I could give one truly definitive answer – but the reality is there is no 'one way'.

Yes – the feedback needs to be specific, the recipient needs to be bought into the fact that there is an issue, and yes, there has to be a mutually agreed action plan to tackle the issue. But there are a plethora of acronymic frameworks out there; all with the express aim of helping managers deliver those difficult messages with maximum buy-in. With a little encouragement, application and practice, it is a skill that a manager can perfect quite quickly.



So where does that leave the recipient in the feedback process? If staff receiving feedback are unwilling, unable, or totally indifferent to the messages that are being offered up to them, then even the managers' best attempts will fail to have the required impact. At best they will be faced with a nonchalant shrug – and at worst, a defensive employee who goes underground to hide their performance flaws and tells everyone they come into contact with, what a bully of a manager they really have.

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Feedback - the single most effective route to raising self-awareness
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Giving feedback is tough. There is no way round it – it's uncomfortable for the person giving it and it's uncomfortable for the person hearing it. But no matter how much people twist and turn to avoid it, giving constructive feedback is the most powerful way of changing behaviour and ensuring that staff constantly evolve their skills and maintain their value to the organisation. It is quite simply the single most effective route to raising self-awareness.

With so much riding on it, managers cannot be allowed to shy away from giving it (avoiding it will only enable the issues to fester and have an increasingly destructive effect on everyone) but similarly, staff must be taught how to receive it. Whether formal and highly structured in the case of 360 degree feedback, or spontaneous and informal in the case of on the job observations, the message should be that giving feedback is a must – and a core part of any manager's role, and receiving it has to be done appropriately and maturely.

Countless surveys have identified that feedback given well, is a positive motivator for staff enabling them to develop skills that they may not have been aware needed development. I have found very little research however, that investigates the impact teaching staff how to receive feedback would have.

When we receive feedback we get an accurate sense of our environment and our behaviour in relation to it – and can usually make our own appropriate adjustments without much outside interference. We rarely see ourselves as others see us and may be unaware that some of our workplace behaviour is causing problems for the people around us. It is the 'knowing' and the 'accepting' that is the key.

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As a customer, I have often tried to give constructive feedback to shop assistants, restaurant staff and call-handlers, when I have felt that a product or service could be improved. Far too often I am met with defensive, sullen responses from staff who think I am just trying to cause trouble for them. They have 'learnt' to accept feedback in this way and in doing so, cut themselves off from a wonderful source of reaction and opinion on how they could improve the customer experience.

The way in which staff react to any kind of feedback is the key to an organisation's ability to constantly re-examine the way it does things, share knowledge and identify improvements. The importance of viewing customer feedback as core to the activities of the team is vital to the growth of an organisation.

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Of course the manager has a big part to play in this. If they are seen to seek out individual and team feedback regularly, feed it back just as regularly AND actively welcome customer feedback, then staff will quickly learn that that is the norm and not something that they should fear. If feedback is viewed as a one-off event that happens only at appraisal, then it will always be a tricky business for both manager and recipient.

Teach new joiners and existing staff the importance of feedback and how to receive it appropriately. Ask them to follow these six simple rules when receiving feedback:

Avoid defensiveness and justification. It achieves nothing and are powerful negative emotions, making the conversation more challenging than it need be.

Greet the feedback positively as a learning opportunity. Your powers of self perception only go so far. People around you notice things, both good and bad, which you don't – and you might learn from their input.

Have nothing to do with re-enacting the conversation with 'friends' in the office, as this only makes you feel ten times worse. Do talk about it with someone else, but make sure you're emotionally detached first.

Ask for specific examples.

Summarise the key points that have been made so that you're absolutely clear as to what has been said.

Thank the person for the feedback. After all, they have taken time and effort to give it to you.

Just as giving feedback is a skill that improves with practice, so is receiving feedback. Staff with no discernible skills in this area will often listen but not hear the messages, display defensive behaviours and end up taking it all very personally. With such negative feelings little or no learning occurs and frustration will increase on both sides.

Similarly if customer feedback is sneered at, read out publicly in the office as something of a joke and then 'filed' appropriately, staff will learn not to take it seriously and opportunities to do something meaningful with it will be missed.

Viewing feedback positively and as a catalyst for influencing organisational change (however small) is the definition of a learning organisation and should be actively promoted at every level.

Staff regularly tell me they are hungry for both praise and constructive feedback – but they too must learn their role in the process. So when a manager next asks you how they should tackle difficult feedback, just check with them that they have trained their staff on how to receive it.

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If you would like more information on how feedback can be used to help your business, then you can contact us on **0870 850 8775** or by e-mail at **info@peppermintlearning.co.uk**

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