

Constructive Feedback as a Key Factor to Project Success

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Introduction

Pressed by time and budget concerns, many managers do not give regular feedback to employees. Others give it only after mistakes, transforming the experience into a punishment as opposed to a learning opportunity. This white paper focuses on how managers can use constructive feedback as a motivational tool that enhances communication and performance.

First, we present our first steps for providing effective communication and feedback. Then, we introduce, based on our experience, some of the reasons why people do not give feedback, and why giving constructive feedback is important.

After that, we introduce four myths about feedback. People who believe that these myths are true will not see the importance of feedback and they will not be willing to give it or ask for it. With these myths, we present some feedback models that can help explain the value, structure, and perception of feedback.

Finally, we give some tips to take the best advantage of a feedback session and, to conclude, we also present some tips to start applying feedback in your company.

Communication skills, why bother?

IT companies frequently do not pay enough attention to communication and soft skills. Well, they may think that communication is not their core business. Our experience tells us that the success of projects depends more on effective communication than on honed technical skills. Also, our new customers demand communication skills as a key factor. As an organization that learns from experience and as a customer-oriented company, we have learned that soft skills are becoming a crucial skill to succeed.

So, as an organization we wanted to improve our communication processes, but where to start? Is not communication a word that relates to everything?

If we were going to start somewhere it would have to be with ourselves. In order to communicate effectively with our customers, we had to communicate effectively within the company. So, we started to ask our people what had to be improved and what they think we can do. After reading a lot of documents, having a lot of meetings, and conducting a survey, we identified the components that we needed to work on, one of them being constructive feedback. This paper includes the theory that we used to learn about feedback and our experience in this process of giving and receiving such feedback.

Why don't people give feedback?

There are a lot of people who try to avoid giving feedback (with feedback I mean comments about performance). According to a study made by Fortune and Industry week [1], the lower the position in the organization, the less feedback is given. The higher the position, the better people think they are at

giving feedback. So, regardless of the position in the company, there is a need to improve in the task of giving feedback.

Why do even the most experienced and skilled managers feel reluctant to give feedback? There are many reasons but the main reason is the fear of hurting the recipient [2]. Managers may be afraid that the receiver of the feedback will feel bad, react emotionally or think that his/her manager is unfair.

Another reason is that managers may not see the real benefits and advantages of a feedback session. Should it be the case, they will probably not even spend a minute in talking to their subordinates about ways to improve. After all, project schedules are tight so there is no time to waste.

The above might be true when it comes to negative feedback, feedback that is given to change or correct some undesired behavior. Nevertheless, some managers do NOT give positive feedback either. Why does it happen? Isn't positive feedback the easy part?

One reason why positive feedback is not given is that the receiver of the feedback can take the opportunity to ask for a reward, a reward that the company may not be able to provide [3]. Also, after a positive feedback session it may be more difficult to give negative feedback [3]. Once again while there might be some truth to these perceived disadvantages, the advantages of giving positive feedback outweigh these apparent disadvantages.

Why is constructive feedback important?

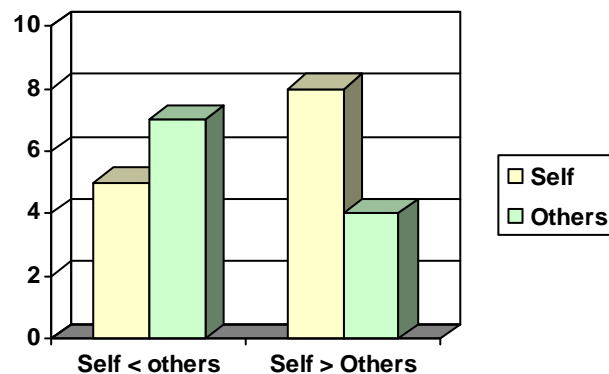
There are several reasons why constructive feedback (that is feedback intended to help) is important. First, it is important for the learning process. The employee may need to learn or improve something but the need may not be obvious for this person. A comment from his or her supervisor or peer may be what motivates the employee to start developing a new skill.

Second and related to the first, constructive feedback improves performance. The new skills employees learn or the corrections they make to a certain behavior, when aligned with the objectives of the company, will help the person perform better.

Third, constructive feedback contributes to the building of effective interpersonal relationships.

Fourth, positive feedback reinforces the desired behaviors.

Finally, feedback is important because it tells the receiver how he or she is being perceived by the others. This can help to improve the accuracy of employees' self-perception [3]. Generally, there is a gap between how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. Some people overrate themselves, while others underrate themselves [3].



Both of these extremes are negative.

Those who overrate themselves tend to be poor performers [3]. They probably will not make accurate estimates, will not see the need for training and will not ask others for help until it is too late. They will probably try to face challenges that are too difficult for them, an action that may jeopardize their chances of success. On the other hand, those who underrate themselves will not set themselves challenging goals, and therefore, they will not excel [3].

Feedback minimizes this gap by eliminating distortions in perception. Positive feedback can help those who perceive themselves lower than they are boost their esteem, and eventually negative feedback will decrease the extent to which others overate themselves [3].

Myths about feedback

Even though some managers may have a positive attitude toward feedback, they may fail because of some false beliefs related to feedback. In this section, we present four myths or false beliefs that can cause the act of giving feedback to be incomplete or unsuccessful.

Myth 1: Feedback is necessarily negative

Some managers believe that feedback is necessarily negative. They do not realize that positive feedback can be a reinforcing and motivational tool. Even when there are some behaviors to correct, the good news should be given first. This will make the receiver more receptive to the negative part.

When it comes to feedback, a rule of thumb is: the more specific the better. This is also true of positive feedback. When we praise a result, it will help if we identify the cause of the success. With this approach, not only will the employee feel that he or she is performing well, but he or she will also know what to do in order to succeed again. Identifying the specific behavior that caused the positive result will increase the chances that this behavior is repeated. Without this specification, the person may feel clueless about what he or she did to succeed.

Myth 2: Only managers give feedback

It is true that the feedback is more effective if the person that gives it also makes decisions about the receivers' rewards. However, if we think that only managers can provide useful feedback, we are missing a great amount of useful information.

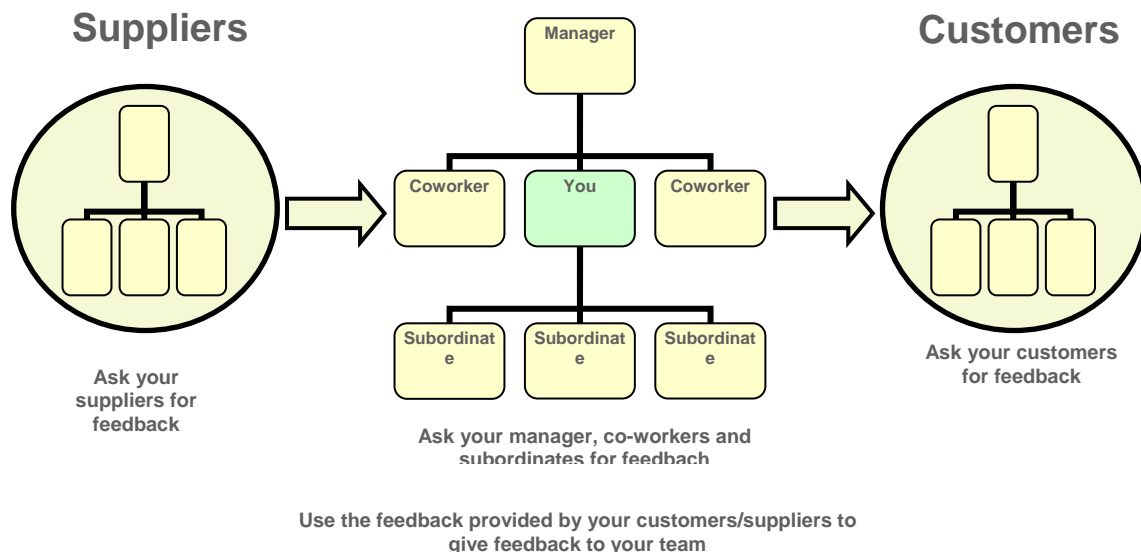
Subordinates and peers can be a valuable source of feedback too, even though sometimes it may not be easy to get honest feedback. In order to get honest feedback from our subordinates and peers, we can use these approaches:

- Request a rate from 1 to 10 [4], and then ask what we would have to do to reach a 10. For instance, if we want feedback from our subordinates about how we handle deadlines, we can ask: "How would you rate my managing project deadlines from 1 to 10?" After receiving a number, the second question would be: "What would I have to change to have a 10?" With this approach, the subordinates will feel more confident to tell the truth because they will not feel that they are criticizing, they are just making suggestions for improving.

- If you suspect that your subordinates want to improve something, go and ask them [1]. For example, one question could be: "I feel that you want to have team meetings more often. Is that correct?" With this question, it is easier to receive a "yes" and some suggestions than if we ask "What do you want me to improve?"

One point to be careful about is that asking for feedback makes the others expect that you will change for better. If, after the feedback, you do not change, you will be perceived more negatively than before [5].

We also have more sources of feedback outside the company: customers and suppliers. Feedback from customers can be of great value in every company. Customers can tell us how we are perceived from outside. Our suppliers can give us feedback about how our company can help them to provide us with a better service or product.



With this model, we can use the feedback that we receive to give more feedback. For example, a customer oriented company can use the feedback provided by the customers to give feedback to the team working for this customer. This will probably result in a better service/product for the customer, reducing the gap between the customers' expectations and real perception.

Myth 3: Feedback is given only in the performance review

Some people believe that the only moment to give feedback is the performance review. It is true that the performance review offers an opportunity to share with subordinates information about how they performed during the evaluation period. However, if we give feedback only in the performance appraisals we are missing a lot of opportunities to help the subordinates perform better.

We should give feedback as near the time of the event that deserves feedback as possible. The sooner we give the feedback the easier will be for the receiver of the feedback to remember the event and to take a corrective action. The performance appraisal can be used to summarize the information already shared with the subordinates, but there should not be too much new information.

Performance reviews usually are tense moments. For this reason, it is not the best moment to introduce a large amount of information. The subordinate will not remember most of it.

How often feedback should be given also depends upon the time of the relationship between the manager and the subordinate. Managers with new subordinates usually have a lower degree of frankness when it comes to giving feedback to the subordinates [2]. When leaders start to know their team better, they develop a higher degree of frankness. The act of giving feedback itself helps to develop openness. Another dimension is the degree of structure of the feedback session [2]. It usually starts with a very structured session. When there is more trust between manager and supervisor, feedback can be given more spontaneously. This is when the feedback is more effective because it is given right after the events that deserve feedback.

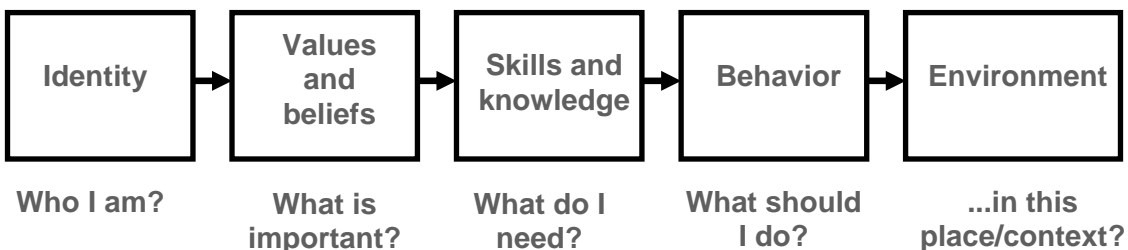
Myth 4: People do NOT change

Those who believe that people do not change will not bother to give feedback at all. Communication is a complex process. There are many reasons why a person cannot change after a feedback session. One of them may be the way that the manager gives the feedback.

Feedback has to be specific. The giver of feedback has to persuade the receiver that something has to be modified. The receiver has to believe that he or she has to change. If not, the receiver will not bother to change at all [5].

There is a basic rule to give feedback: Describe, Do not value [2]. What should we describe? We have to describe our perceived behavior, our feelings and sensations and how it affects the working processes. Telling the other what we perceive makes it easier for the other to accept what we said. After all, the other cannot question what we feel. What should we not value? We must not make value judgments or reproaches. If we do, we can cause an emotional reaction or make the receiver feel hurt because we are talking about the other, not about ourselves.

Another useful model for giving feedback is the beliefs model. Robert Dilts created a model with five levels [6]. From a psychological standpoint we work most of the time in one of these levels. The basic level is the environment. We act in this environment through our behavior. Our behavior is conducted by our skills. These skills are organized by our beliefs and values. Finally, the beliefs and values are conducted by the identity.



When there is a performance problem, we can find that the cause of the problem is not always a behavioral problem. For instance, an employee can fail to perform a task because he or she does not have the required skills to perform such a task. In this case, training will be an adequate course of action.

Citing another example, if there is an unsafe workplace, it is likely that the employee does not perform as well as he or she could either.

Identifying the level of the performance problem helps to make decisions about how the problem will be tackled. If the problem is outside of the behavior level, maybe is not responsibility of the employee. In this case, the employee would not change regardless of how much feedback he or she receives.

Identity, values and beliefs levels are harder to change. These levels define who we are and what is important for us. For this reason these levels are associated with emotions. Giving feedback in these levels will probably cause an emotional reaction.

Tips for taking advantage of a feedback session

A feedback session should be planned as any other meeting. The more structured and the longer the session is, the more planning it will need. Before giving feedback to their subordinates, managers should ask themselves [7]: What is the purpose of the feedback session? What specific actions do they want to reinforce or correct? What are the consequences of the actions? (i.e.: customer satisfaction). The answer to these questions will help determine whether the feedback session is really needed and will help to set its priority.

Since a feedback session can have uncomfortable moments, managers should also be clear about what information they need, what questions they need answered and what they want to accomplish with the feedback session. Usually it helps to have a template with these questions and their respective answers. The answer to these questions helps when dealing with people who know how to avoid questions and how to change the subject. A session plan will help to keep the session on track.

Logistics and time issues have to be considered too [7]. Managers have to be sure that they have an adequate place to meet with the subordinate. Also, they have to make sure that they have enough time for the feedback session. Some managers dedicate little time to giving feedback. They do give feedback but they finish the session when the subordinate is starting to understand the feedback. This is the moment when the subordinate needs most support. Others give a superficial feedback but use their lack of time as a strategy not to get too involved in the process of giving feedback and to avoid questions that may be hard or awkward to answer. Both actions are detrimental to the learning process of the subordinate and to the interpersonal relationship. Dedicating the time that the subordinate needs is necessary if we expect a positive change to happen.

Last but not least, managers should ask themselves what weaknesses they need to overcome to achieve success in giving constructive feedback, and how they will overcome these weaknesses [7]. These questions include the soft skills necessary to communicate effectively and to be persuasive, and also the ability to lead by example.

How to implement a communication culture

It may not be easy to start giving and receiving feedback as an open door company. It involves a change in the culture, and this can take some years to develop. Also, a change like this has to start and be promoted at the top of the company. If the top executives do not believe that a positive result can be obtained and that this change is worth the effort, it is likely that everything will stay the way it is.

Not every company is ready for such a change. Even after trying hard, some companies may fail to implement constructive feedback and effective communication. Some companies are designed to communicate poorly. How can we tell?

We can start reviewing our policies and practices. Such policies and practices tell us a lot about the culture. What kinds of people are recruited? How are people promoted? Which behaviors are rewarded? Which behaviors are punished? For which skills is the company providing training? If these policies are

not aligned to promote effective communication, trying to make any change will be like rowing against the current.

Robert Dilts' beliefs model also applies to a company. If we want to change the behavior of the company, it may need a change in the values and beliefs. It may need a change in the mental models of the people working there. It may need a change of identity (mission). Such a change will be hard and will happen slowly but it will pay off in the long term.

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