

A Coaching Approach to Feedback

The importance of feedback

Feedback conversations are a vital part of good leadership and management practice. They enhance learning and help people to improve performance by increasing their level of awareness of what they do and how they do it.

Regular two-way feedback conversations also help to build a culture of continuous improvement within the organisation.

Giving feedback that is useful and constructive, without demotivating team members can sometimes be challenging.

Your experience of feedback

Think about recent feedback you've received and note down your reflections:

- How did the conversation make you feel?
- What was your reaction?
- What was it about the conversation that created this effect?
- What was the impact on your performance or behaviour?

Feedback and performance

According to research by the CIPD (2016), it is peoples' reaction to feedback and not the feedback itself that determines how it affects performance and engagement. Two factors influence this:

The degree to which self-esteem and self-worth are threatened.

Feedback that threatens a person's self-esteem tends to lead to negative responses. People who express positive emotions immediately after receiving feedback go on to perform better than those who express negative emotions. (Kluger and DeNisi 1996).

Perceptions of procedural justice and fairness.

This relates to 'decision-making processes and the degree to which they are consistent, accurate, unbiased, and open to voice and input' (Colquitt et al 2013). People are more likely to improve performance if they believe the feedback process is fair.

Reaction to feedback is key

Regardless of whether or not the feedback is positive or negative, the way in which feedback is given determines the emotional reaction, and ultimately if the feedback is effective in achieving change and improvement. To increase the probability of success, feedback should be:

Respectful and encouraging to ensure the person's self-worth is maintained

Fair and balanced, with opportunities for the person to be an active participant in the conversation

Occur within supportive relationships, built on trust and integrity

Coaching and feedback

How can we ensure that people leave the conversation feeling valued, respected and fairly treated? What can we do to make feedback a learning opportunity that enhances performance and development?

The answer lies in a coaching approach to feedback. The most powerful feedback people receive is the feedback they give themselves. In a coaching model of feedback, the person learns to self-assess before receiving feedback from others. This technique can be applied to a range of situations that require reflection on learning and performance.

What is coaching?

There are many different ideas and definitions of coaching, but John Whitmore, author of *Coaching for Performance* (2017), provides this description:

“Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them. The coachee acquires facts and develops new skills and behaviours, not by being told or taught but by discovering from within, stimulated by coaching”.

Characteristics of coaching

It is a non-directive approach. The focus is on learning, not on telling or instructing. The coachee is seen as active, resourceful and responsible for their development.

The emphasis is on supporting the coachee's learning in a way that empowers them to find their own answers. The coachee leads the conversation.

The role of the coach is to listen intensively, using focussed and open questions to stimulate the coachee's thinking, helping them explore situations, develop solutions and identify actions.

The relationship is based on equality, which encourages openness and trust. The coach is not jumping in with answers and the coachee feels their contribution is valuable.

Benefits of coaching feedback

- The process is two way and more likely to be seen as fair. Information is shared rather than the coach delivering their opinion
- The coachee learns the skills of reflection and self-assessment by evaluating their own performance, enhancing self-awareness
- Insights and ideas come from the coachee. This creates ownership, self-reliance and responsibility for learning
- Distinctions are not made between positive and negative feedback. All feedback is viewed simply as learning feedback

5 Levels of feedback

Whitmore provides examples of the 5 levels of feedback commonly used in organisations:

Feedback	Impact
A: You are useless	A personalised criticism that is disrespectful. It damages self-esteem and confidence and is bound to make future performance even worse. It contains nothing helpful.
B: This report is useless	This judgemental comment directed at the report, not at the person, also damages the coachee's self-esteem, though less badly, but it still provides no information on which they can act to improve the report.
C: The content of your report was clear and concise, but the layout and presentation were not sophisticated enough for the target readership	This avoids criticism and provides the coachee with some information on which to act, but is insufficient in detail and generates no ownership on their part.
D: How do you feel about the report?	The coachee now has ownership, but may give a non-response such as 'fine' or to make a value judgement of the work such as 'great' or 'awful' rather than a more useful description.
E: What are you most pleased with? If you could do it again, what would you do differently? What are you learning?	In response to a series of open questions such as these, delivered in a non-judgemental manner, the coachee is likely to give a detailed description of the report and their thinking.

Aim for level E

Level E is a non-directive coaching approach to feedback:

- It uses focussed, open questions to accelerate learning because the coachee is compelled to engage their brain and get involved.
- The coachee must recollect and formulate their thoughts before they can articulate their response. This promotes awareness.
- The coachee learns to evaluate their own work and therefore become self-reliant. In this way, they 'own' their performance and their assessment of it. This is responsibility.

Whitmore states that when awareness and responsibility are optimised, learning occurs.

How do you give feedback?

Think about recent feedback you've recently given and note down your reflections:

- What is your preferred approach when giving feedback?
- Do you tend towards a directive or non-directive style?
- In what situations might a non-directive coaching approach work well?

The GROW coaching model

The GROW model is a well-known framework used to structure coaching conversations. It ensures conversations stay on track and lead to clearly defined results (Whitmore, 2007).

The phases of the coaching conversation are named after the specific focus for discussion. The coach facilitates learning by asking open questions in each phase. The model is flexible and allows for phases to be revisited.

The GROW model can easily be adapted for feedback conversations.



GROW phases

Each phase of GROW has a distinct purpose:

Goal	Reality	Options	Will
What do you want to get out of this?	Where are you now?	What could you do?	What will you do?
Establishes outcome the coachee wants from conversation	Clarifies the current situation	Shifts the conversation to a solution focus	Determines commitment to action

GROW feedback framework

The feedback process can be mapped on to the GROW model. When using GROW for feedback, the golden rule is that the coachee always shares first:

Stage		Content	
G	Set intention	Goal questions set the intention for the feedback discussion. They focus attention and raise energy. Setting goals up front lays the foundation for a productive conversation.	<p>Ask: What do you/we want to get out of this?’</p> <p>Add: I want</p>
R	Recognise	Focus on what the coachee did well to raise energy and awareness of strengths, thereby building confidence and accelerating learning. If performance is low, this step is vital. Once they have finished highlight what you thought they did well. Acknowledge their effort, even if they have not been successful. Avoid negative judgement or criticism.	<p>Ask: What is going well/went well</p> <p>Add: I like/liked</p>
O	Improve	Non judgment is key to a safe learning environment that inspires creativity and creates engagement. Giving the coachee time to reflect on what they would like to change before you add any of your own suggestions will build self reliance and responsibility.	<p>Ask: What could be done differently?</p> <p>Add: How about?</p>
W	Learn	Checking in on learning and what will be different builds a partnering relationship that reinforces confidence and expectation. Agree specific actions. Check you are both, clear on priorities, timelines and commitment.	<p>Ask: What is the learning and what will you/we differently</p> <p>Add: I am learning...I will do...</p>



Coaching feedback tips

Build the conversation around 3 questions:

What happened?
What did you learn?
How will you apply the learning?

Use open and purposeful questions that stimulate thinking and invite the person to talk more fully about their experience

Resist the urge to jump in with an answer too early. Allow the person time to explore their own thinking fully

Notice non-verbal messages such as tone of voice, facial expression and body language. Probe for what seems to be unsaid

Reflect back content to clarify, and check understanding. Summarise to consolidate learning

Be fully present and listen well to build trust and create the right thinking space

References

CIPD, (2016), *Could do better? Assessing what works in performance management*

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/performance/what-works-in-performance-management-report#gref>

Whitmore, J (2017 edition), *Coaching for Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London