

How to Give Effective Performance Feedback Guidelines for Supervisors

Performance feedback is an essential element of the supervisor/subordinate relationship. The vast majority of people want to make a difference in their place of work. They want to be recognized for their accomplishments and learn how to become even better. They want to know where they stand. People crave feedback that is honest, positive, objective, and fair.

Surprisingly, something as simple and effective as performance feedback is often rare. Even in the United States Air Force, where formal feedback is a mandatory part of the evaluation system, as many as half of the workforce say they rarely get feedback from their supervisors.

I see three main obstacles to giving effective feedback in today's leadership environment. First is the pace of operations; supervisors often say they are so busy they don't have the time to devote to giving feedback properly. Second is the collegial atmosphere in many modern workplaces. The good news is that many supervisors have taken time to know their subordinates and their families. Their "door is always open." The bad news is that this familiarity can make it hard to look someone in the eye and tell him or her they could be more effective.

The third obstacle might be the readiness of the subordinate to receive feedback. Subordinates might have trouble recognizing there are areas in which they can improve. They might be defensive or concerned for their jobs. There might be personality differences or other issues between the supervisor and subordinate that interfere with communication. An effective supervisor must be aware of all the dynamics of the relationship and make appropriate adjustments in the approach to feedback.

A formal feedback process has important advantages for supervisors. It motivates subordinates and helps them become more effective. By establishing a dialogue with subordinates, supervisors can better understand their individual wants and needs, and the climate of the organization. In organizations like the Air Force, where retaining quality people is a high priority, an effective performance feedback system is essential.

Principles for Giving Performance Feedback

Specific – Feedback must be based on observable behavior, not one's feelings or the conclusions drawn from the behavior. For example, "Last Friday morning I saw you help Mary fix a problem on her computer. Your willingness to share your expertise is a great example of teamwork and makes this a more effective organization." This specific example, tied to a positive organizational outcome, is more effective than saying "You are a helpful person," since the subordinate can link the feedback to an actual event.

Timely – Feedback should be given in a timely enough manner so that both parties can recall the specific behavior involved.

Actionable – Feedback should be based on something over which a person has control. When necessary, the supervisor should identify ways to improve performance.

Measurable – Goals and objectives should be stated in terms so that both parties will know if the goals are achieved.

Achievable – Performance measures should be realistic and within the resources that are available to the subordinate.

Positive – Give both positive and critical feedback, but tip the balance in the positive direction. The Center for Creative Leadership suggests a 4:1 ratio of positive to critical feedback.

Non-evaluative – Opinions, perceptions, and reactions should be differentiated from facts. Don't psychoanalyze; avoid inferences and interpretations. Avoid labels.

Establish a dialogue – The effective feedback session is not a one-way communication. The supervisor should ask the subordinate if he or she fully understands what is being said and then listen carefully to the response. The supervisor should ensure the subordinate understands his or her role in the organization and how that role contributes to the goals and mission of the organization.

Initial Feedback

The supervisor should meet with the subordinate soon after the arrival of the new member. In the Air Force, initial feedback is required within the first 60 days of arrival. The purpose of the initial feedback session is to help establish the relationship between the rater and ratee. It is also about setting expectations for the upcoming rating period. It is not necessary to negotiate objectives with the subordinate, but the supervisor should help the subordinate take ownership of the goals and internalize expectations. Both parties should leave the initial feedback session with a clear understanding of what is expected. The supervisor provides a written record of the feedback session. This written record is held in confidence between the rater and ratee.

Annual Feedback Versus Routine/Daily Feedback

The Air Force requires that supervisors conduct a follow-up feedback session mid-way through the evaluation period. This session should be conducted using the principles above, and should address the extent to which the expectations were met. As before, a confidential, written record is provided.

The annual performance appraisal system is not a substitute for good communication within the workplace or for timely routine feedback. For example, if the subordinate is

consistently late for routine meetings, it makes no sense to wait until the annual appraisal cycle to make that person aware of the problem. In the same way, workers who consistently perform above standards should not have to wait months to know that their work is appreciated. Supervisors should not assume that, because certain behaviors are obvious to them, they are equally obvious to the subordinate. Daily or routine feedback needs to remain consistent with the principles above.

Finally, supervisors who routinely give feedback (both positive and corrective) to subordinates may want to follow up with a personal note or memo. It is possible that the feedback is so routine (or the subordinate so unreceptive) that the subordinate misses the message or doesn't even realize that feedback has taken place.

Giving feedback is a key responsibility of a leader. Work climate surveys strongly suggest that job satisfaction, morale, and retention are closely related to the ability of a leader to provide feedback. Senior leaders must set the example for the organization by giving timely feedback and demanding that leaders at all levels do the same.

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