

A Performance Feedback Approach for the YouTube Generation

Abstract

Well-delivered feedback can lead to dramatically improved performance. Despite this potential, many of us feel mild to extreme discomfort with it due to the potential for misunderstandings and hurt feelings. This discomfort translates to lost opportunities for growth when we either deliver feedback in such a way that our message gets lost or avoid giving it altogether. In this session, we introduce a tool for overcoming this discomfort based on lessons learned observing MBA students give feedback to each other. We turned these lessons into a YouTube-based exercise to enable students to iteratively turn their ordinary feedback into extraordinary feedback.

Keywords: Feedback, Communication, Coaching

1) Teaching Implications:

Audience

The exercise we introduce fits best in any management course that has managing and coaching employees as central themes. Thus, we anticipate our session will be most useful to participants who teach organizational behavior, leadership, or management skills at all levels. Of course, we would also welcome the participation and feedback of anyone who sees value in improving feedback-giving skills.

Background & Concept

Anyone who has learned or taught a challenging skill (e.g., how to teach management courses, write research papers, speak another language) appreciates two general truths about learning: (1) useful feedback is students' best friend (Podsakoff & Farh, 1989) and (2) their own ego defensiveness is often their worst enemy (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Our observations of our students and ourselves tell us that most of us fail to give good feedback because we overly concern ourselves with one of these two truths and disregard the other.

At the one extreme, highly quantitative and performance driven people tend to focus mostly on the task at hand. Often rushed by their own self-imposed demands, they get right down to addressing task performance head on and state exactly what they believe are the problems and solutions. Feedback givers of this type feel like they are being helpful, yet their messages often fall flat or get completely rejected due to a lack of human connection with their recipients. Indeed, forgetting that feedback is a human process loaded with imperfect communication and impression management concerns as well as insecurities (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 2016) can completely undermine the feedback process. Though we have come across a few

people who welcome unfiltered feedback about themselves, we have found that most interpret such communication as raw criticism and react defensively to it.

At the other extreme, more experiential and relationally driven people focus completely on their relational connection with the recipient of their feedback. Being concerned with others' emotions or, at least, being perceived as likeable (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996), feedback givers of this type focus on making sure their counterparts feel good about themselves after the conversation ends. As well-intended as this approach is, it often kills counterparts with kindness. To borrow a metaphor from Gary Goleman's recent comedy special, they do the equivalent of sending the receivers of their feedback off to a hot date "with spinach in their teeth" because telling them might cause embarrassment.

A very few people, in our observation, know how to strike the balance between these two extremes (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). These masters craft conversations that bring out performance-improving insights while creating and maintaining a human connection with recipients as people who need to feel psychologically safe as well as informed. Rather than tell recipients what they think, feedback givers of this type ask more questions such as, "How are you doing today... is talking now good for you or should we reschedule work better?" "How do *you* feel about your performance?" "What did *you* think went well/best?" "What would *you* change/improve?" In recursive fashion, we have turned their wisdom into a lesson on feedback that allows students to see how to improve their feedback techniques while keeping their egos and emotions in positive states.

Learning Objectives

Our session has specific learning objectives as well as general learning implications. The following outline summarizes the former.

- Defining the problems with feedback
 - Two issues to be managed: the human and the technical
 - The extremes of feedback: how and why we mismanage
- The solution: Person-centered feedback
 - Creating Connection
 - Conferring Control
 - Positive Posture
 - Sensible Summaries

The primary learning implication here concerns how we think about helping others. Our colleagues who research organizational citizenship behavior cast interpersonal helping as a highly desirable form of organizational behavior (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Lesser-known research in social psychology informs us that helping behaviors, like giving feedback, are often rife with power implications that

can lead to interpersonal conflict (Nadler, 2002). Specifically, attempting to provide others with unneeded assistance (i.e., pointing out a shortcoming of which they are already aware) can induce unfavorable and even hostile responses. Based on this understanding, the main takeaway here is that we should allow our students (as they should allow their future employees) to experience failure on *their own* terms and, unless intervention is mission critical, only provide help they request.

2) Session Description and Plan:

We will walk through our feedback exercise exactly as it has been delivered to undergraduate and MBA students in both the US and abroad.

Given that the live version of the exercise takes 30 minutes, we see a 60-minute session as optimal. We would use the first half to walk through the exercise exactly as we do it in class and then use the second half to have a discussion regarding our mutual experiences using this and other feedback exercises.

If scheduling constraints withstand, we could see a shortened, 30-minute version working in one of two ways. If there is a similar proposal, then one way would be to do a combined session in which each would present followed by a joint Q&A and feedback at the end. The second way would be to do a standalone session with the understanding that attendance would be limited to no more than 10 participants.

The following timeline reflects the 6-minute plan (30-minute alternatives listed parenthetically). All discussions and exercises are interactive.

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|------|---|----------------|
| I. | Personal introductions | 10 (5) minutes |
| | Names, teaching areas/experience, & expectations | |
| II. | Introduction to exercise | 8 (5) minutes |
| | The presenter will briefly explain the simulation exercise ... | |
| | ... that volunteers will then play the roles of feedback giver and receiver | |
| | ... after we watch a video of the “receiver” performing a song. | |
| | The presenter will then play the video | |
| III. | Role Play: | 10 (5) minutes |
| | Presenter will ask for volunteers | |
| | Presenter will ask “givers” to demonstrate “ordinary” feedback | |
| | Two or, time-permitting, three rounds of feedback will occur | |
| IV. | Feedback problems & solutions | 12 (7) minutes |

Presenter will play two videos illustrating the extremes of feedback
Presenter will then ask for a volunteer to deliver improved feedback
As a group, we will then take the perspective of the receiver and discuss how we can make the feedback even better

- V. Debrief & Wrap-up 20 (8) minutes
- a. Participant reflections & feedback
 - b. Participants other experiences and lessons learned
 - c. Q & A

3) Application to Conference theme:

Once upon a time, Winston Churchill quipped, “To improve is to change, to be perfect is to change often.” We have embraced this philosophy and have come to understand that good feedback informs us if, when, and how we should change. We have also come to understand that how feedback is delivered can matter as much as, if not more than, its technical content. We anticipate, therefore, that our session will help others navigate their changing currents by improving the quality of the feedback process they experience from us and our students. We are convinced that improving the process itself will lead to the generation *and* integration of insights needed to improve performance.

4) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

This is a new proposal for addressing a longstanding challenge. We have never presented this exercise at OBTC or any other venue besides our own classroom activities. Given the overwhelmingly positive response we have received from students, we felt that we should share it with the OBTC community and hope to have the opportunity to do so. Thank you.

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