

The Power of Positive Regard:

Revisiting Corrective Performance Feedback with Generation Z Students

Introduction

As effective teachers we have the responsibility to create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to student learning. Encouraging participation, sustaining engagement and fostering higher-level learning are all factors to consider when creating a positive learning class culture. In addition, Whetten (2007) articulates the importance of course design in developing a student-centered learning environment. He identifies three interrelated components that result in higher learning and performance: 1) Higher level learning objectives; 2) Active learning activities, and 3) Developmental learning assessments. In this Roundtable Discussion, we concentrate on the third component of course design: Developmental learning assessments. Specifically, we focus on the in-person delivery of corrective performance feedback to millennial and Generation Z students. Our discussion will center on what are the best ways to deliver negative, albeit developmental, information about graded performance (learning assessments) to our current student body.

Providing feedback is a topic that enjoys a long history in psychology (e.g., Ivey, 1988) and management (e.g., Bigelow, 1991; Robbins & Hunsacker, 2007). In fact, guidelines for providing feedback on performance is fundamental to conducting performance appraisals and as such this topic is found in most Human Resource Management and Management Skills textbooks (e.g., Stewart & Brown, 2014; Whetten & Cameron, 2015). While the principles for providing performance feedback are well established, our teaching experiences have led us to adapt these principles to rely more on positive regard when providing corrective performance feedback to

our current student body. Positive regard should be a part of all communications, however, we contend that our reliance on this attribute is in response to the learning preferences of millennial and Generation Z students. We also note that delivery of corrective performance feedback that is perceived by students as being too harsh or unyielding can have lasting, undesirable effects on learning. Therefore, our intended outcomes for this Roundtable Discussion are to explore the following questions/issues and to provide a working framework for incorporating positive regard when giving corrective performance feedback.

1. In what ways learning preferences of millennials and Generation Z affected the ways you provide corrective performance feedback?
 - a. Discuss the literature on learning styles of the current generation and current workforce demands. Are there substantive differences in student learning styles that necessitate a different teaching (feedback delivery) approach? Is good teaching effective no matter the student generation? What specific aspects of corrective performance feedback influence the degree and quality of learning?
2. What does positive regard look like in the teacher-student relationship?
 - a. Discuss definitions of positive regard and how it relates to other factors (e.g., trust, demeanor, power balance/empowerment, safety).
 - b. How does positive coaching and positive psychology inform our perceptions of positive regard and approach to providing corrective performance feedback? How does this approach relate to counseling versus coaching?
3. What techniques can be used to ensure positive regard when giving performance feedback? Discuss how a “jujutsu” approach can be applied to the corrective performance feedback interaction. How can the interaction empower students and how can empathy be

used in the interaction? Is the “sandwich” approach to providing feedback still valid (positive feedback followed by corrective feedback and ending the interaction with positive, constructive feedback)?

4. Discuss and develop a set of best practices to follow/use as guide when providing corrective performance feedback to millennial and Generation Z students and employees.

Our target audience for this Roundtable Discussion is any educator interested in discussing how to better deliver corrective (and often negative – such that something was not done correctly) performance feedback in a manner that increases students’ motivation to learn. This Roundtable is also applicable to any management educator interested in the application of positive psychology/coaching as it relates to performance feedback. We next briefly outline the theoretical foundations and teaching implications of the discussion questions that we posed above.

Theoretical Foundations and Teaching Implications

We draw from positive psychology and management communication and interpersonal skills to outline the main discussion points of this proposed session. We start with an overview of learning preferences of millennials and Generation Z and outline the main elements in providing effective feedback. We then examine positive regard and how it influences other interpersonal factors that affect the teacher-student relationship. Finally, we explore what techniques can be used to ensure positive regard when giving corrective performance feedback and suggest a set of best practices to follow/use as guide when providing corrective performance feedback to millennial and Generation Z students and employees.

Generational Learning Styles and Giving Effective Feedback

Much has been written about preferred learning styles of millennials (e.g., Anderson, Buchko, & Buchko, 2016; Krueger & Redd, 2015; Markulis, Murff, & Strang, 2011; Tyler, 2008), and more recently Generation Z (e.g., Beall, 2017; Lane, 2014). In general, millennials (or Gen Y) are the generation born between 1977-1995, and Generation Z (or iGen) refers to those born after 1996. While distinctions have been made between these two generations we have noted that in our classes the current student body has a need for structure, assignments that “count” and hands-on learning and feedback. When it comes to feedback there is clear agreement that both millennials and Generation Z students expect immediate and regular feedback. However, what is less clear is how this student body responds to negative feedback. Some studies have found that corrective feedback is desired as long as it specifically indicates what needs to be changed (Peergrade, 2017; Zenger & Folkman, 2014). Anderson and colleagues (2016) found that when delivering negative feedback it must be perceived as benefiting the person/student and should be consistent and ongoing. These authors also found that the when giving corrective performance feedback, the delivery must be assertive enough but sensitive to the fact that the recipient may have difficulty accepting such feedback. Carmichael (2014) provides a set a guidelines for giving feedback to millennials, stressing that managers (and teachers) should praise effort not ability. Indeed, the current generations of students have been criticized for wanting praise for just showing up and have grown up with hearing only positive feedback about themselves (Pollak, 2015).

While we whole-heartedly believe in individual differences and do not view our students from a negative lens, we have had to become more sensitive to our approach of providing corrective performance feedback. Table 1 provides a summary of valuable principles we have followed and taught over the years when communicating with our students and providing

feedback on performance. A number of these principles relate to our practice of positive regard such as using communication that is validating and achieving understanding from the student.

We next articulate how positive regard has permeated and influenced the ways in which we provide feedback to millennial and Generation Z students.

Table 1: Principles of Effective Communication and Feedback

Principles of Supportive Communication (Whetten & Cameron, 2015)	Effective Feedback (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2009)	Interaction Outcomes – “Wise” Solution (Fisher & Ury, 1983)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem-oriented • Congruence • Descriptive • Validates • Specific • Conjunctive • Owned • Listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on Specific Behaviors • Keep Feedback Impersonal • Keep Feedback goal-oriented • Well-timed • Ensure Understanding • Controllable by Recipient • Tailor to Fit the Person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve the Interest of both parties • Take Community Interests into Account • Durable, Lasting, and will be Carried Out. • Tied to Objective Criteria • Maintain or Improve the Relationship

Positive Regard

Unconditional positive regard entails communicating respect for another person – *as a person* separate from the evaluation of performance (or content of communication) (Rogers,

1959). Showing positive regard while giving corrective performance feedback means that the message is delivered with empathy and warmth. While in the past we may have relied solely on our grading rubric to explain why points were deducted, we now find ourselves listening more to the perspectives of the student(s) and “hearing them out.” It is less about who is right or what is right than it is about understanding how a particular response or answer came about. Students need more justifications about constructive feedback. As in, why their “way” might not be the best way. It also involves a slowing down and a deliberate show of concern for the student. Similarly, positive regard includes reassurance and a recognition that the instructor also wants to see the student do well. In our experience, positive regard does not mean a changing of the grade but an authentic involvement in the emotion of the (poor) performance.

In many ways, this positive regard plays out like Rogerian client-centered counseling. Whetten and Cameron (2015) distinguish between coaching and counseling, articulating that coaching is used when a manager is giving advice and direction for improving work skills and counseling is used when addressing problems involving emotions or personalities. It would follow that most of what college instructors do is coaching – providing direction and advice – i.e., instruction. However, we found that we are often also relying on a counseling skills set. This blending of coaching and counseling is represented through the field of positive psychology coaching, where positive emotional states are applied to teaching (e.g., Biswas-Diener, 2010; Froh & Parks, 2013). It is the practice of positive psychology that expands the perimeters of coaching and teaching while not crossing over into clinical psychology and student concerns that require professional psychological attention.

We believe that showing positive regard to students helps build trust and creates an environment that is conducive to learning. It allows students to answer the “what’s in it for me?”,

without the learning roadblocks of defensiveness or disconfirmation that can result when positive regard is absent. We next suggest ways of incorporating positive regard when delivering corrective performance feedback.

Positive Regard within the Corrective Performance Feedback Framework

We contend that demonstrating positive regard and developing a student-teacher relationship that is based on positive regard is a dynamic process that is achieved over time. Our Roundtable Discussion centers on positive regard and how it can be integrated into the interaction when giving corrective feedback. Carmichael (2014) recommends against the “sandwich” approach and suggests that permission to provide feedback should be asked. In this session we assume that the student wants feedback and we do not risk insincerely by sandwiching our corrective feedback. Our suggestions below reflect our experiences using positive regard and serve as thought-starters for discussion.

Initiating the Interaction: Putting others at ease and framing the meeting. Create a mutually receptive climate for problem solving. The greeting is positive and friendly; recognition and acknowledgment of the nature of the situation is expressed. Empathize regarding performance but remain optimistic. We often sit down with the student(s) to reduce power differences and defuse any defensiveness or disconfirmation (can help to defuse tension, although standing is fine too). Use an abbreviated Jujutsu approach – gentle, yielding – collaborative versus competitive.

Providing the Corrective Performance Feedback: Co-review the performance. Actively listen to their reasoning and empathize with/understand their approach. The biggest difference for us is spending more time, listening and emphasizing about what went wrong; even bringing humor into the situation. Do provide the correct information (and why) and briefly

explain how this level of performance can be achieved. (Tomkin & Ulus (2015) article on critical reflection applies here.)

Closing the Interaction: Take some time to reiterate the key areas/points that need to be corrected and check for understanding. Take a big picture approach and continuous improvement attitude. As positive regard is ongoing, we encourage students ask questions and engage in the learning process with us.

Session Description – Timeline: Roundtable Discussion – 60 minutes

0-15 minutes: Introductions and Overview. Discuss learning preferences of current students. Do our experiences match with the literature? How have you changed your teaching (assignment instructions/delivery, grading) to reach millennial/Generation Z students? (All discussion points can be done in small groups and then we can come together to share ideas.)

16-30 minutes: Discuss positive regard. How do you see positive regard in your classrooms? How do you consistently demonstrate positive regard? What are the benefits of positive regard?

31-50 minutes: Discuss a set of best practices for providing corrective feedback. Which points are unique to the new generation? Which points are time-tested?

51-60 minutes: Summarize session, identify areas in addition to positive regard that can influence the effectiveness of providing corrective performance feedback.

References

- Anderson, E., Buchko, A., & Buchko, K. (2016) Giving negative feedback to Millennials: How can managers criticize the “most praised” generation. *Management Research Review*, 39(6), 692-705, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-05-2015-0118>.
- Beall, G. (2017). 8 Key Differences between Gen Z and Millennials
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-beall/8-key-differences-between_b_12814200.html
- Bigelow, J. 1991. *Managerial skills: Explorations in practical knowledge*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *Practicing Positive Psychology Coaching*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carmichael, S. (2014). Everything You Need to Know About Giving Negative Feedback. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2014/06/everything-you-need-to-know-about-negative-feedback>.
- Fisher, R. and Ury, W. 1983. *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Froh, J. & Parks, A. (2013) *Activities for Teaching Positive Psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ivey, A.E. (1988). *Managing face-to-face communication*. Bromley, England: Chartwell-Bratt Ltd.
- Krueger, D. and Redd, R. 2015. Class Engagement: Reaching your Millennial Students. *Proceedings of the 42nd Annual Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference*, University of LaVerne, LaVerne, CA.

Lane, S. (2014). Beyond Millennials: How to Reach Generation Z.

<http://mashable.com/2014/08/20/generation-z-marketing/#9k.Uwek1e8qm>

Markulis, P., Murff, E., & Strang, D. 2011. Should college instructors change their teaching styles to meet the millennial student? *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 38: 189-200.

Peergrade (2017). Can negative feedback drive students? Retrieved from

<https://medium.com/peergrade-io/can-negative-feedback-drive-students-2d2eea420dee>

Pollak, L. (2015). Yelling Doesn't Work: How to Give Negative Feedback to Millennials.

Retrieved from <https://www.lindseypollak.com/yelling-doesnt-work-give-negative-feedback-millennials/>.

Robbins, S. & Hunsaker, P. 2009. Training in interpersonal skills: Tips for managing people at work. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice Hall.

Rogers, C.E. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A study of a science*. (Vol 3). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Stewart, G. & Brown, K. (2014). *Human Resource Management: Linking Strategy to Practice* (3rd edition). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tomkins, L. & Ulus, U. (2015). Is narcissism undermining critical reflection in our business schools? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2015, 14(4), 595–606.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amle.2014.0107>

Tyler, K. 2008. Generation gaps. *HR Magazine*, 53 (1): 69-72.

Whetten, D.A. (2007). Principles of effective course design: What I wish I had known about learning-centered teaching 30 years ago. *Journal of Management Education*, 31(3):

339-357.

Whetten, D. & Cameron, K. (2015). *Developing Management Skills* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Zenger, J. & Folkman, J. (2014) Your Employees Want the Negative Feedback You Hate to Give. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2014/01/your-employees-want-the-negative-feedback-you-hate-to-give>