**(HR) Manager in the Hot Seat: An Exercise to Practice Delivering (and Receiving) Performance Feedback**

**Abstract**

Performance conversations are a critical and necessary part of performance management. Feedback is most effective when it is constructive and when it involves a dialogue rather than a monologue, but people often struggle with this skill. This article explains an experiential exercise that applies a five-part process for performance feedback, appropriate for human resources, conflict management, and/or organizational behavior classes. Students identify performance-based issues, create a plan to address the issues, craft an email to their employee requesting a meeting, meet with and engage in a performance feedback conversation, and develop an improvement plan collaboratively with the employee. “Managers” and “employees” reflect on the effectiveness of the performance conversation. This five-part exercise can be used in an undergraduate- or graduate-level course. Recommendations for adopting the exercise to the online environment are included.

**Keywords**

Experiential exercise, experiential learning, performance feedback, business communication, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, emotional intelligence

**Introduction**

Managers are responsible for addressing issues in the organization, particularly when the issues involve the performance of their employees. When a performance issue arises, managers are in the hot seat to solve them. However, giving good feedback does not come easily. Managers may particularly dislike (and therefore avoid) giving negative feedback (e.g., Fisher, 1979) or sugar-coat it to avoid conflict or maintain good relationships with employees (cf., London, 1995). Thus, students need to practice giving effective feedback in order to strengthen their skills in this arena. In this session, conference attendees will get to play out a classroom activity in which students diagnose an issue, initiate a feedback conversation, collaboratively develop an improvement plan, and then reflect on their own performance as managers, having received feedback from their “employee” on how the session went from their perspective. This activity can be used successfully in undergraduate and graduate courses as well as online, hybrid, or in-person modalities. The activity is appropriate for human resource management, organizational behavior, or business/executive communication courses covering feedback or performance management.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Nearly 96% of human resources (HR) professionals report that performance management is their number one concern (Aguinis, 2009). Feedback comprises a significant piece of performance management. Feedback can affect the perception and performance of employees (Larson, Jr., 1984), but feedback is not always effective in improving performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The literature reveals that the communication styles and behaviors of managers when interacting with employees can directly affect the motivation and behavior of employees (Colquitt et al., 2019) and turnover intentions (Cascio, 2014). Feedback provides an opportunity for managers to engage in active listening as they address issues while supporting and building the esteem of employees to enhance their performance and increase their perceptions of engagement and responsibility in their own job performance (Aguinis, 2009). Furthermore, feedback, among other purposes, helps to develop employees’ competence and enhance their involvement (Aguinis, 2009). Thus, managers’ feedback skills may strongly impact employee performance and thus organizational performance. In addition, people may need practice in effectively receiving feedback, as feedback may engender many emotional reactions (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009) and cause people to revert to ruminating about the self rather than focusing on improving performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

This activity consists of a role-play, which can be effective in engaging students and increasing information processing (Clawson, 2006). This performance management exercise gives students concrete experience and the opportunity to make observations and reflect on what happened, key elements in Kolb’s (1984) Learning Cycle. Additionally, it gives students the opportunity to accept and engage with emotions and anxiety, which can be key in helping others improve (Vince, 1998), in a safer context than an actual performance review.

**Learning Objectives**

Participants will:

* Identify and understand the dimensions of job performance.
* Develop and hone business and managerial communication skills.
* Demonstrate active listening and critical thinking skills.
* Coordinate and facilitate a performance feedback conversation.

**Exercise Overview**

Teaching feedback delivery techniques to business students prepares them for workplace conversations and provides an opportunity for them to develop and hone core managerial competencies valued by organizations. This experiential exercise teaches how to effectively deliver performance feedback. Students are paired with a peer or a volunteer from outside the class who will play the role of the employee in a case study. Pre-assigned peers and volunteers receive the employee’s copy of the case. Students fill the role of manager and receive the manager’s copy of the case study which contains one or more performance issues relative to the employee in the case. In this exercise, students must identify performance issues, create a plan to address the issues, schedule and record a meeting with their pre-assigned employee to address the issues, and collaborate with the employee to develop an improvement plan. After the feedback session, students watch the recorded meeting, receive feedback from their employee, and reflect on the effectiveness of the session. The exercise is designed for use in an undergraduate- or graduate-level course in management, human resource management, or organizational behavior wherein performance management or group mechanisms is emphasized.

This exercise is designed to help students learn to deliver constructive performance feedback by placing them in a mock managerial role in an assigned case study. Prior to conducting this exercise, instructors should teach the definition and dimensions of job performance, feedback delivery techniques, conflict resolution strategies, and review best practices for effective performance feedback dialogues.

Using a fictitious business scenario, students are paired with a peer or volunteer to engage in a performance feedback conversation that will require them to participate from the points of view of the manager. It is not recommended to pair students in the course with other students in the course for this exercise as it may dilute the organic experience if they review and participate in the employee role before becoming the manager in the hotseat. Instead, students from other classes may be offered extra credit to play employees; at the graduate level, faculty members, alumni, and/or managers from the community may play “employees” to provide further opportunities for development.

The exercise requires some preparation on the part of the instructor and the students. The instructor is responsible for recruiting, selecting, and assigning a peer and/or volunteer to each student in the course. The instructor is also responsible for providing instructions, expectations, guidelines, and meeting times for this exercise as well as disseminating case studies to each student and participating mock employee. This exercise is best conducted on a video conferencing platform (i.e., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx) so that students can record their performance feedback meetings. Students are responsible for setting up the virtual meeting, directly emailing the link to their pre-assigned mock employee, and recording and submitting the recording of the meeting.

The exercise can be run with a class as small as five students or as large as thirty (or more) students. For class sizes larger than 10, it is recommended to divide the class participants so that peers or volunteers may be re-used. For example, for a large class, Volunteer A may be pre-assigned to the employee role for more than one student (Manager). Volunteer A may play the role of the employee for Student 1 at 3:00pm and play the same role in a different meeting with Student 2 at 3:45pm. It is recommended to include a minimum of 15 minutes in between each performance meeting should the employee need to reset, log out of one meeting, and log into the next one. Logistics of the exercise are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Logistics of Running the Exercise**

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| Logistics of the exercise | Recommendations |
| Materials needed  Setting  Total # of participants  Team sizes  Timing | Case studies; computer with internet, webcam and audio; headphones  Video conferencing platform (Zoom, Teams, WebEx)  5 or more students plus employee volunteers (e.g, in a class of 30 students, 10-12 volunteers are sufficient)  Pairs are recommended (1 student and 1 peer/volunteer)  15-20 minutes per meeting with 10-15 minutes in between meeting intervals; The entire exercise can be completed in 45-50 minutes across all student meetings |

A debriefing session follows the completion of this activity by all students and can be conducted at the end of the class or in a subsequent class session. The debriefing session is a great opportunity to review and discuss student experiences, approaches, and challenges after participating in the exercise. In addition, assign the students to write a reflection paper (or essay) regarding their individual experiences and the outcome of their facilitated performance conversation with their employee. Before turning in their essay, students are provided with feedback from their “employee” partner and must take this feedback into account in their essay, which is due one week after the role-play.

This exercise is designed for in-person, hybrid, or virtual classroom settings. It can be successfully modified for synchronous or asynchronous online course formats with some variations.

**Session Description**

In this 75-minute session, we will introduce the activity, allow participants to experience the activity, discuss how to run the activity in undergraduate vs. graduate classes and in different modalities, explain how “employee” volunteers are recruited, and discuss with participants how they might use or adapt the activity in their courses.

* Welcome and introduction: 5 minutes
* Passing out scenarios, assigning employee-manager pairs, and reading time: 20 minutes
* Performance management role play: 20 minutes
* Debrief: 15 minutes
* Discussion of different class levels, formats, logistics of the exercise, and participant Q & A: 15 minutes

All participants will receive the manager and employee versions of the case as well as an example reflection essay assignment to modify for their courses.

**Conclusion**

This exercise allows students an opportunity to apply course content, lectures, and learning objectives and ultimately hone their critical thinking and interpersonal and managerial communication skills to meet the needs and expectations of careers in human resources or management. Practicing these skills in the classroom will aid them in enhancing pertinent skills in preparation for future management and leadership roles.

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