

Skip the Sugar:

The Modern Manager's Guide To
Providing Feedback Effectively



Do You Dread Giving “Constructive” Feedback?

You’re not alone. It is one of the most difficult challenges for supervisors, managers and business leaders. Praising someone is easy, but no one enjoys telling someone they need to improve their performance, which is why so many times, constructive feedback is sugarcoated.

Here’s how to effectively tell employees what you think – without the sugar – while strengthening relationships and building your team’s receptiveness to change.

In this guide, we will discuss:

- The reasons why annual performance reviews are ineffective.
- Why feedback matters to your employees – and your business.
- The principles of delivering feedback.
- The four types of feedback.
- The mistakes people make when offering feedback.
- How to avoid making those mistakes.
- Tips to ensure your feedback is heard and received.

Let’s get started!



Feedback Is NOT an Annual Performance Review

For decades, companies have relied on annual performance reviews as a form of feedback, but most managers (and employees) know that these types of reviews are highly ineffective. Forty-five percent of HR professionals do not think annual performance reviews are accurate reflections of employee work.

The Problems with Annual Reviews

Annual reviews present a challenge for actually improving performance because:

- **They are not timely:** It's hard for managers to remember all the positive and negative of the past year. It's even more difficult for employees to correct behaviors when performance discussions occur just once a year.
- **They over-generalize:** Traditional reviews typically involve a rating system in a set of generic competencies. Using broad categories to measure performance provides an inaccurate snapshot of an employee's true contribution level. Is someone really a top performer because they scored well in vague categories?
- **They reduce employees to numbers:** No one likes getting bad grades. Reducing employees to a numerical ranking system can make their contributions feel minimal.
- **Performance reviews are tied to salary:** To top it off, these untimely, generic, numerically based reviews are then tied to salary increases.

Is it any wonder annual performance reviews are ineffective at motivating employees and boosting performance?

A much better approach is to provide ongoing, actionable feedback.



Why Feedback Matters

We've seen how annual performance reviews are ineffective, but why is feedback any better?

First and foremost:

Frequent and ongoing feedback helps to establish trust.

Not-so-fun fact: According to the Harvard Business Review, 58% of people trust perfect strangers while **just 42% of people trust their boss!** Creating a culture of feedback can boost the trust that employees have for leadership, and that trust yields positive change in other areas.

Providing ongoing feedback and establishing trust boosts engagement.

Gallup reports that managers are responsible for 70% of employee engagement variances:

- Employees who say their managers communicate regularly are three times more engaged than employees who say their managers do not communicate regularly or well.
- 43% of the most highly engaged employees say they receive feedback at least once per week.

Feedback isn't just about feeling good. It translates to real engagement, and **highly engaged teams show 21% greater profitability.**

If your entire company felt highly engaged, what would that do for your productivity and bottom line?



Having Trouble Retaining Employees? Try Adopting a Culture of Feedback

So, feedback makes employees feel more connected to their work, but did you know it can also help you retain great employees?

If your company offers only annual reviews and turnover is high, it's time to consider some essential facts about retention and feedback:

- Companies that operate in a culture of feedback have 14.9% lower turnover.
- 24% of workers said they would leave their jobs if managers provided inadequate performance feedback.
- 21.5% of employees that don't feel recognized for good work have interviewed for a job in the last three months.
- 24% of employees who felt they had not received recognition in the past two weeks report recently interviewing for a job.
- 96% of employees believe showing empathy is an important way to advance employee retention – the WAY you provide feedback matters!

Providing ongoing feedback generates engaged, profitable teams who stay with the organization for the long term.

But providing actionable feedback that translates to bottom-line results requires a thoughtful and organized approach.



The Principles of Effective Feedback (No Matter the Circumstance)

For feedback to provide the desired result, the employee must receive that feedback in a way they feel is informative, motivating and actionable. No matter when, where or how you are delivering feedback, it should adhere to these five principles:

One: Focus on Behavior, Not the Individual

If the employee feels the feedback is directed at their character or personality, they will feel attacked (and rightly so). Feedback should always focus on a specific behavior so that the employee knows what to focus on to improve.

Two: Make Positive Feedback Dominant

If an employee only hears negative feedback, they will be demotivated. Whenever someone does something well, praise and recognize them. That way, when you have to deliver constructive feedback, they will be more receptive.

Three: Feedback Must Be Timely in Order to Matter

Waiting until an employee's annual review to provide feedback is ineffective. Nobody can remember what happened three, eight or 12 months ago. That's why it's important to provide feedback as close to the event to which it relates. Ongoing feedback is much, much more effective than annual feedback.

Four: Help the Employee Improve

When feedback is negative or constructive, don't leave the employee floundering, wondering how to proceed. Work with them to provide developmental guidance so they know what steps they can take to improve performance and correct issues.

Five: Recognize Improvements

Celebrate employees when they have made recognizable improvements and when they do things well. Feedback isn't just about correcting behavior; it's about reinforcing behaviors you want employees to repeat. Make sure you recognize performance improvements and positive outcomes.



The Four Types of Feedback

Feedback is feedback, right? Not quite.

All feedback can be classified in one of four ways:

1. **Directive feedback:** As the name suggests, this type of feedback provides clear direction. "All sales reports need to be turned in by 4 pm on Fridays."
2. **Contingency feedback:** This type of feedback outlines consequences. "If you interrupt people while they are talking, like you interrupted Bob in today's meeting, they will not cooperate with you when you need them."
3. **Attribution feedback:** Ties an action to a quality about the person. "Thank you for your presentation today. It was concise but clear. You are an excellent communicator."
4. **Impact feedback:** This shows how someone's actions impact other people in the organization. It provides a "why" for what you are asking the employee to do. "When your sales reports are not turned in by 4 pm on Fridays, it impedes my ability to make revenue projections. Not only does this cause me problems with leadership, but it also impacts our budget."

The type of feedback you choose to deliver to an employee will depend on both the situation at hand and the person you are providing the feedback to. It's important to tailor the way you deliver feedback to the individual, so they will be more receptive to what you are saying.



So, Which Type of Feedback Is Best?

Employees will react differently to receiving feedback on their performance and behavior. Positive feedback is almost universally received, but constructive feedback is where things get a little tricky.

You can't force anyone to agree with your feedback, but you can improve the chances it will be well-received by customizing your feedback.

- **Always consider the circumstances:** Giving feedback to a seasoned veteran will be different than giving feedback to a relatively new employee.
- **Factor in an employee's exacerbating circumstances:** An employee who just lost a family member, or going through a divorce or other hard time, could be struggling at work. Never assume you know what's going on but consider adjusting your timing and approach when outside stressors are a factor, especially if the employee has a long history of high performance.
- **Never assume:** Don't assume that poor performance is laziness. Talk to the employee about what's going on. Perhaps they are not yet comfortable with a new process, or missing information from another employee, so their report was incomplete. Work together to uncover causes and solutions.
- **Don't judge:** You're not there to psychoanalyze. You're there to coach. Have a two-way conversation in which you both listen and provide advice.
- **Consider the individual:** Some people are open to all kinds of feedback, process the information quickly and use it to continually improve. Others need more time to process. Some want your help working out solutions; others want to come up with solutions on their own.
- **However, don't be bullied:** There will always be employees who react poorly to constructive feedback. This should not deter you from delivering that feedback. If someone's performance is lackluster and they refuse to accept and act on feedback, they are likely not the right person for the job.



Don't Stumble:

Avoid These Common Mistakes When Delivering Feedback

Your delivery does matter when offering feedback, whether positive or constructive. Here are some of the most common mistakes that managers and leaders make when delivering feedback:

- **You focus on the person:** Remember, feedback is about a specific action or behavior, not an individual's personality. Judging who they are will instantly make them defensive.
- **You aren't providing specifics:** Vague feedback cannot be acted on. Be specific about the behavior or action you want to be repeated or corrected.
- **You're acting on someone else's feedback:** Don't offer third-party feedback. Stick only to what you've observed first-hand.
- **You exaggerate:** "Always" and "never" are exaggerations and will not be received well because the person will immediately cite a time when they did or did not do what you are saying they "always" or "never" do.
- **You assume:** You know what happens when you assume. Never think you know what is behind an employee's poor performance or positive performance.
- **You beat the proverbial dead horse:** Know when to stop talking. Deliver the feedback, search for solutions and then move on. If you keep circling back to what the employee did wrong, it will demoralize and demotivate them.
- **You imply a threat:** It's fine to share consequences with an employee. "If you interrupt people like you did this morning to Bob, people will stop cooperating with you." However, don't threaten someone's job. It will create deep animosity and will not motivate them to change.
- **You try to use humor:** Sarcasm and humor have no place in a feedback conversation. It will almost always be taken the wrong way.
- **You phrase it as a question:** Some people phrase feedback as a question to soften constructive criticism. This tends to lead to indirect and ineffective criticism.



When It Comes to Feedback, Timing Is Everything

As previously mentioned, feedback must be timely to matter to employees. Providing feedback as close to the event/behavior as possible is the best way to help correct issues and reinforce positive behaviors or actions you want the employee to repeat.

To ensure that your real-time feedback is received and acted upon, keep these strategies in mind:

- Keep it specific. Instead of saying, “You did a great job,” say, “You were extremely proactive in assisting this customer. By researching their problem and developing a solution before you responded to them, you saved a ton of time and ultimately helped us retain their business. Great job!”
- Deliver feedback through a variety of channels. Develop a variety of ways to deliver real-time feedback, so you can tailor it to the individual and the situation. You can:
 - ❖ Pull an employee aside to personally thank them.
 - ❖ Acknowledge an individual’s hard work in front of their team members.
 - ❖ Use collaboration tools like Slack.

Varying the ways you provide feedback keeps your efforts fresh, meaningful and effective. Keep in mind that public feedback is best for positive feedback. Constructive feedback is always best delivered one on one.

- Commit to consistency. Integrate feedback into your regular management activities. Schedule brief, weekly one-on-ones with employees to discuss what they are doing right and what they can improve. Meeting regularly sends the message that you care about employee success.



How to Be Heard When Giving Feedback

It's not enough to provide feedback. You want to make sure that your feedback is heard and received by the employee, whether positive or constructive.

Don't Forget: Focus on the Situation, Not the Person

- Address the issue: "Your presentation could use more visuals."
- Avoid commenting about the person: "You are too boring when you present."

Always Be Specific

- Give concrete tips for improvement: "Your reports must be filed by 9 am so finance can do its job. When you are late, it makes them late."
- Avoid generalities: "You're always late filing your reports, and people are getting mad."

Provide Encouragement

- Frame a positive solution: "You are very insightful, and I'd love to hear you speak up more in meetings."
- Avoid framing a negative problem: "You don't speak up enough in meetings."

Speak From Your Perspective

- Use "I" statements: "I need your report by Friday so I can finish this proposal."
- Avoid "you" statements: "If you don't turn that report in by Friday, you're going to ruin the proposal."

Know When to Keep It Private

- Give criticism privately: "Between you and me, your presentation could use more visuals."
- Give praise publicly: "Before we adjourn, I'd like to say that this presentation was excellent."

Always Include a Positive

- Praise helps staff know what they're doing right: "You clearly spent a lot of time researching this. I am impressed with how thorough a job you did."
- Correction helps staff make weaknesses stronger: "I'd love to see your presentation design be a little more engaging so that your research is not only highlighted but really seen by the client."



The Do's and Don'ts of Providing Feedback To Remote Employees

Giving feedback to employees who work remotely isn't necessarily the same as giving feedback to employees who work in-house. The basic principles are the same, but you need to make some adjustments when providing feedback from a distance.

DO:

- **Be specific:** This rule is a constant with all feedback, whether positive or negative, in-house or remote.
- **Be timely:** Prompt feedback is another universal rule. Employees must be able to tie the feedback to an event/action/situation that is fresh in their minds.
- **Choose the right channel:** Share positive feedback publicly in Slack or through other channels. When offering constructive feedback, use video chat, not the phone, so it's a more personal conversation.
- **Be equitable:** Deliver feedback in a way that is equitable to the role, regardless of whether the person is in-house or remote.

DON'T:

- **Be the only talker:** Have a two-way conversation. Ask questions and above all else, listen. When the employee actively participates in action planning, they will feel more in control and be more invested in the solution.
- **Make assumptions:** This is yet another universal "don't" when providing feedback. Even if you think you know, you have no idea what a remote employee is dealing with at home.
- **Forget the employee:** Don't offer feedback and then forget about it. It's easy for remote employees to be out-of-sight-out-of-mind. Follow up the same way you would with a local team member.



Are You Ready to Develop High-Performance Teams?

The business case for providing ongoing feedback can't be overstated. By moving away from the frustrations and ineffectiveness of annual reviews, you can cultivate a culture where people feel supported even through challenges, where they feel coached, where they value their own development, and ultimately, they will do their best work and stick with you.



But finding the time to create, develop and implement such a culture takes time. That's where a strategic staffing partnership can help.

The right staffing and recruiting partner can support you in this initiative by:

- Helping you find well-aligned candidates quickly for open roles.
- Filling in gaps with skilled contract and temporary employees.
- Handling performance management for contingent workers.
- Freeing up managers to focus on culture cultivation.
- Reducing turnover.

Work with your staffing partner to get the most out of your relationship and start boosting performance and retention today.

