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How You Can Get a Positive Reaction from Your Negative Feedback

Does your feedback address these three factors?

You have a scheduled meeting with a subordinate. The feedback is going to make the person squirm. In this paper, we will provide

research-based suggestions to help you be more effective in giving negative feedback.

You will not be surprised to learn that providing negative feedback seldom changes behavior. As professors Lisa Steelman and Kelly Rutkowski of the Florida Institute of Technology write, “numerous studies have demonstrated that unfavorable feedback results in negative attitudes, less acceptance of the feedback, and unwillingness to change behavior.” (2004).

Researching how to improve the effectiveness of negative feedback, the two psychologists collected information from 405 employees who ranged in tenure from one year to 42 years, with an average tenure of 18 years. Eighty-eight percent were males and 12 percent were females. They ranged in age from 22 to 64 years with an average age of 45.

Their primary finding: “Contextual” factors outside of the feedback itself can mitigate the negative consequences. In other words, prior to giving negative feedback, ask yourself three questions:

- Does the employee view me as a credible source of information?
- Have I made my intentions clear?
- Am I providing clearly defined achievement goals?

Does the Employee View Me as a Credible Source of Information?

Reporting relationship and credibility are not necessarily the same thing. Are you credible in the eyes of your subordinate?

You may believe that you understand the employee’s job requirements and have in-depth knowledge about job factors for successful job performance. You may believe that your race, sex, and age should have no bearing.

Your self-perception may be valid—and irreverent. How does this subordinate perceive you? For example:

A client company provides a highly technical SaaS (software as a service) for the financial service sector. The company's vice president of IT reports to the CEO. He is losing credibility with peers and with his boss because of a tendency to be highly critical of peers at team meetings. The CEO believes the male VP does not respect her because she came up through the finance function, is not a technical expert, and is female.

The CEO is in a dilemma. The VP's technical contributions are so important that the CEO would like to retain him. On the other hand, the CEO cannot avoid confronting the VP about his dysfunctional behavior.

In the above case, we recommended hiring an outside consultant to conduct a 360 survey of the top management team. The rationale was to use the survey results to improve the entire top management team and not simply point to the VP. At the same time, the VP would receive the negative information from an impartial source.

Have You Made Your Intentions Clear?

The researchers found that “the recipient’s perceptions of the source’s intentions in giving feedback have stronger impact on reactions than negative feedback itself.” In the above case, we recommended that the CEO be clear that the purpose in giving feedback is not to collect data to justify firing termination. The CEO does not wish to fire the VP but will if forced to.

We recommend that you be clear in your conversation. Back it up with a written note to the employee. For example:

“On a scale of 1-5, your C-suite peers and I gave you an average rating of 2. When we measure how you are perceived by your peers this time next year, my goal is that you move the scale to 3.

"In other words, I expect you to be perceived as an "average" contributor to C-suite meetings and not below average."

Are You Providing Clearly Defined Goals?

What positive behaviors do you wish to see? What is your timeline? How will you measure success? What resources are you prepared to offer to help the employee succeed?

In some jobs, success is easy to quantify. Sales is the most obvious example. In the case above, the CEO needs success about managing stakeholder perception. For example:

Six months from today I am going to evaluate you on the following measures:

I have observed The VP look at issues from an enterprise-wide perspective:

0=Never

1

2

3=Sometimes

4

5=Always

The goal is to achieve an average rating of 3. "

Summary and Conclusions

Providing negative feedback to subordinates is one of those important yet uncomfortable responsibilities of leadership. Based on the research conducted with over 400 employees, you can increase your

effectiveness by making sure three key issues are addressed in addition to the negative feedback: credibility of feedback source, clarity of intentions, specificity in measures of improvement.

References

L.A. Steelman and K.A. Rutkowski. "Moderators of Employee Reactions to Negative Feedback." *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, January 2004.

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