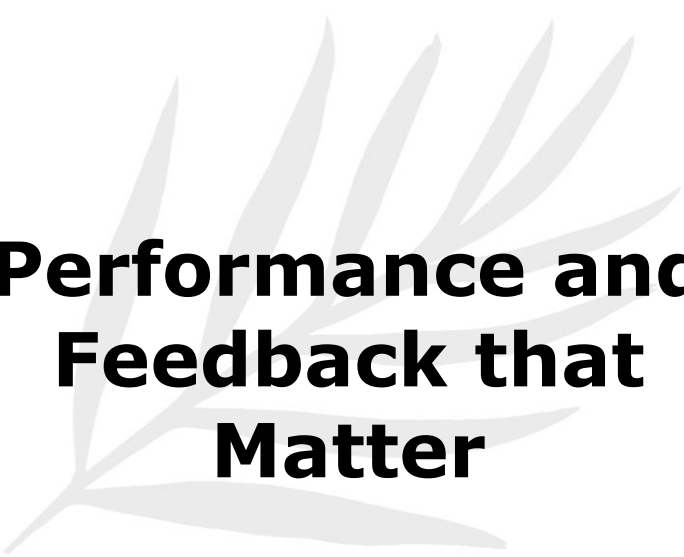




Performance and Feedback that Matter

Reference Book

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Performance and Feedback That Matter Package.....	1
The Purpose Feedback	2
The Benefits of Feedback	3
The Mechanics of Feedback	4
Frequency and Effectiveness	4
The Costs of Seeking Feedback.....	5
Feedback as a Leadership Tool	6
Choosing Positive or Negative, Behavioural or Output Feedback	7
Prevention of Bullying	10
Mental Health, Non-task Issues and Stress	11
Performance Management and Feedback	12
FOCUS	13
Core Skills.....	14
Building a Culture of Feedback.....	14
Designing Constructive Steps.....	15
Matching Feedback to Situations.....	18
Language	20
Clear and Specific Content	22
Defining Expectations	22
Clarifying Understanding	24
Using Resistance	25
Communication Techniques.....	27
LACE.....	28
FIDO	29
Open Feedback Sandwich.....	30
Self-Management.....	32
Emotions and Beliefs	32
Personal Development, Self-review and Soliciting Feedback	32
Adapting the Supervisor Role to Teams	33
Planning Feedback.....	34
Further Reading.....	35

This reference book is a collation of notes
for the Grevillea Foundations Package
Performance and Feedback that Matter.

It is intended to work in conjunction with elements of the package,
Including the workshop content, its exercises, the workbook
and other handouts.

Introduction

The Performance and Feedback That Matter Package

This package focuses on the skills of the supervisor for the task of guiding performance and the critical role of feedback. It will cover some useful concepts and techniques for giving and receiving feedback. It will highlight some key communication skills and provide opportunities for participants to practice them and get some feedback about their own performance.

Feedback is never a one way process. The supervisor receives feedback even while giving it. This package encourages supervisors to develop their capacity and constructively use resistance and self-management to increase their effectiveness as leaders.

The main segments of the workshop are:

1. The mechanics of feedback
2. Performance management and feedback
3. Core feedback skills
4. Communication techniques
5. Self-management
6. Planning feedback.

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The Purpose Feedback

Feedback helps supervisors and their teams achieve outcomes in the following areas:

1. Expectations

- Clarify performance expectations with individuals and teams
- Find and address obstacles to meeting expectations
- Clarify tangible goals

2. Guidance and Steering

- Step by step support for staff as they work on new or difficult tasks
- Managing day-to-day employee performance
- Focus on productivity, motivation and new ways of doing things

3. Improving Performance

- Match rewards and affirmation to expectations and targets
- Increase capacity for delegation by developing staff responsibility

4. Addressing Malfunctions

- Improve compliance to address performance shortfalls
- Address staff conduct that is on the edge but not crossing the line
- Defining boundaries and promoting preferred behaviours
- Identifying personal trauma cues and getting support for staff under stress
- Early intervention for deteriorating practices

5. Improving Supervisor Performance

- Testing assumptions through feedback loops
- Demonstrating that you take and expect responsibility seriously so others will too

6. Support Performance Planning

- Implement the practice of performance and development plans
- Structure reviews and planning around performance plans

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The Benefits of Feedback

The benefits of feedback depend strongly on how well it is done. If you engage in put-downs, emotional irresponsibility and obsessing on negativity then you are not engaged in feedback, you are just a bully. Feedback is about helping people and the business be the best it can be. Done well, feedback can produce benefits like those listed here.

1. Better business outcomes

- Stronger teams getting more results
- Better customer service and stakeholder outcomes

2. Promotes learning

- How well we do
- Where we can improve
- Supervisors can learn about their own effectiveness
- Resolves emerging performance issues

3. Stronger teams

- Mutual respect and cooperation between supervisors and staff
- Supervisors develop a better picture of team strengths and activities
- Stronger focus on team priorities and getting results
- Creates time for supervisors and staff to talk about the business and build relationships

4. Personal and professional growth

- Confidence and self-esteem from doing a good job
- Increased willingness to stretch and try new things
- Prepare for new roles and career steps
- Better performance can lead to a healthier work-life balance

5. Build culture

- Supportive and encouraging
- Self-awareness about roles and results
- Personal initiative to improve priority areas
- Increased motivation through clarity about what is expected

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Feedback can affect how people deal with work related stress and commit to the organisation. These have been regarded as factors that can indicate the likelihood of staff turnover. As turnover is an expensive and disruptive event in organisational life, it is worth the investment of supervisor time to develop good feedback processes to maximise performance and retention.

The 2000 McKinsey and Company's War for Talent Survey showed that candid, insightful feedback was considered one of the top three of 14 items when people were asked its relevance for their professional development. The other two were great senior role models and building skills to boost career prospects. However, less than half thought their companies did feedback well.

The Mechanics of Feedback

Frequency and Effectiveness

Feedback is not always effective at getting targeted results. Research has shown there can be quite low effectiveness rates for feedback. There are however some findings that link the frequency of feedback and other factors with performance results.

Experimental work by Kang and others showed that more frequent feedback was more effective than less frequent feedback. However, this was also linked to whether there was an incentive system in place. In other words, to get the benefits of feedback there have to be incentives for people to improve their performance. Just getting paid for coming to work and doing it is not incentive enough. Feedback needs consequences.

Analysis by Alvero and others of feedback research over several decades appears to confirm that the effectiveness of feedback is linked to other systems in the workplace. These systems can include things that happen

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prior to the feedback, such as clear goal setting, or things that happen after the feedback, namely consequences, whether they be affirmations or penalties for how the person performs and responds to the feedback.

The Costs of Seeking Feedback

In their work on feedback seeking practices after career transition, Callister and others recognise the cost of seeking feedback. Drawing on the work of Ashford, they nominate two feedback seeking strategies (see below) and the costs that go with them.

People may choose to monitor for feedback, seeking cues and other information about how they are doing. This requires low effort, hence low personal costs but might only generate information with low benefits.

Alternatively people can inquire after feedback. This might have greater personal costs but can yield greater benefits. The costs might be of a public nature with the possibility the person inquiring will look insecure. However, the benefits are that they might obtain the specific feedback they desire.

People seeking feedback might want to manage the impression they make on their boss, rather than improve their performance. That is, they can look diligent, enthusiastic or responsible when they seek feedback.

Tuckey and others identify different attributes people look for in who they approach or monitor for feedback. These are:

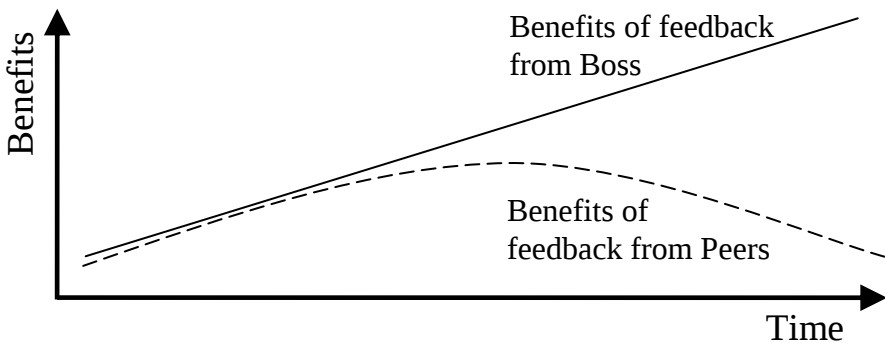
Expertise	Technical knowledge and skill linked to the subject of the feedback. Expertise can indicate the ability of the feedback provider to produce useful information.
Accessibility	The ease of getting the feedback corresponds to a cost of feedback seeking, ie. more effort equals more cost.

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Reward Power	Whether the feedback provider is in a position to reward or punish. This is something that makes the boss' feedback valuable.
Relationship Quality	May influence feedback. A poor relationship may imply higher personal or emotional costs when seeking feedback.

Feedback as a Leadership Tool

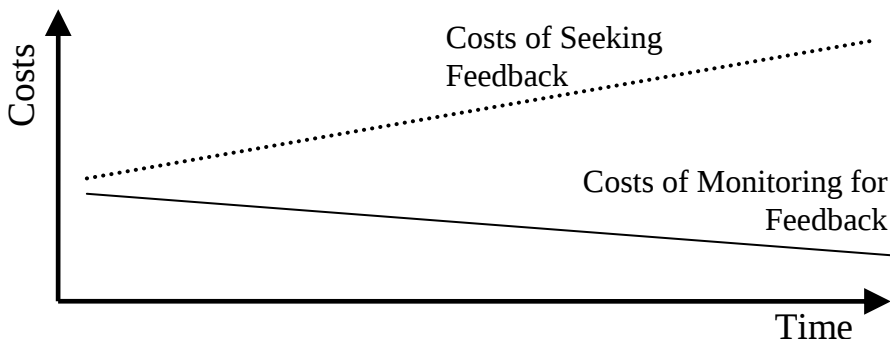
Whether you realise it, you are already giving feedback to your staff. Even if you have not conducted a formal feedback session, team members watch you for cues and information about their performance.



Research by Callister and others shows that feedback from their supervisor becomes more important to a person the longer they are in a job. Initially a person in a new role seeks feedback from peers and their supervisor. Over time, their focus is more on their supervisor's feedback. However, this is partly driven by the desire to manage their image with their boss who chooses the rewards or penalties that affect their job and career.

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This makes feedback a critical leadership tool for supervisors. While staff may seek feedback they also have an alternative strategy, which is to just monitor their supervisor for cues. If the supervisor does not have a conscious strategy and practice for providing feedback then their cues may mislead staff. This can result in an underperforming team which is bad for everyone – staff, supervisor and the organisation. Supervisors need to deliberately plan and deliver feedback strategies to get the most from their teams.



Choosing Positive or Negative, Behavioural or Output Feedback

Jaworski and Kohli did research on salespeople to test assumptions about feedback. They measured different types of feedback, combining its valence (negative or positive) with its locus (output or behaviour).

They then looked for how the different types of feedback impacted on two areas:

1. Output performance (the level of business results)
2. Behavioural performance (the quality of interactions with people)

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They also looked at the way different types of feedback affected performance. It could be a direct result on performance or an indirect result through role clarification.

Finally, they examined how the different types of feedback affected people’s satisfaction with their supervisor relationship.

Jaworski and Kohli’s Typology of Feedback

		Locus of Feedback	
		Output	Behaviour
Valence of Feedback	Positive	Positive Output Feedback	Positive Behavioural Feedback
	Negative	Negative Output Feedback	Negative Behavioural Feedback

The study showed that positive feedback for output and behaviour was found to get performance results two ways. Firstly it has a direct link to getting performance results. Secondly it has an indirect link through role clarity. Positive feedback was also related to satisfaction with supervisors.

Negative feedback for output and behaviour has no direct relationship with performance. It does appear to affect role clarity, and so has an indirect effect on performance.

Thus, unlike positive feedback, which appears to have both an informational and a motivational function, negative feedback

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primarily seems to serve an informational role. (Jaworski and Kohli, 1991)

Negative feedback does not appear to affect satisfaction with supervisors. So, while positive behavioural feedback can enhance the supervisor relationship, critical feedback does not appear to harm it.

It is worth noting Hempel's studies in China about reactions to performance feedback. Recipients attribute reasons to the supervisor about why they are giving feedback. When the prior relationship is poor, the recipient tends to hear negative feedback as the supervisor giving a message about the relationship rather than about poor performance.

This is further supported by Adams' work. Curiously, liked individuals can receive less feedback overall, including positive feedback. The amount of negative feedback to liked individuals varied, with more negative feedback when they performed poorly than when they performed well. Whereas less liked individuals can receive the same amount of negative feedback, regardless of whether they are performing poorly or well.

This suggests that liked individuals have to be more active in soliciting feedback if they want it. Considering the costs of seeking feedback, these individuals may be able to discount the cost because they are liked.

It also suggests that managers have to work hard to build positive relationships with people outside of the feedback process if they want their feedback to be heard. They also need to monitor the amount of negative feedback they give to make sure they are focused on getting an outcome. Otherwise, they may be just reacting to people they don't like and ironically, neglecting the feedback needs of the people they do like.

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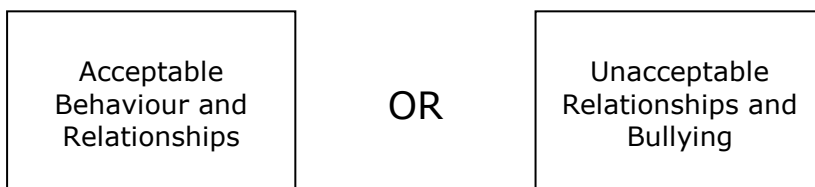


Prevention of Bullying

Much of the literature on bullying appears to focus on how to recognise it, its consequences and what to do when it occurs. The literature on prevention often refers to the importance of strong anti-bullying policies and responses to situations of bullying.

There is a surprising lull in the conversation when it comes to the role of the supervisor in preventing bullying, especially how supervisors set standards and work with staff to keep these standards. In conversation with HR professionals they talk about how they try to get their codes of conduct to point to the required behaviour rather than just be seen as defining the boundaries of when something is wrong.

We suggest a linear approach to bullying not box approach. The difference is shown in these diagrams.



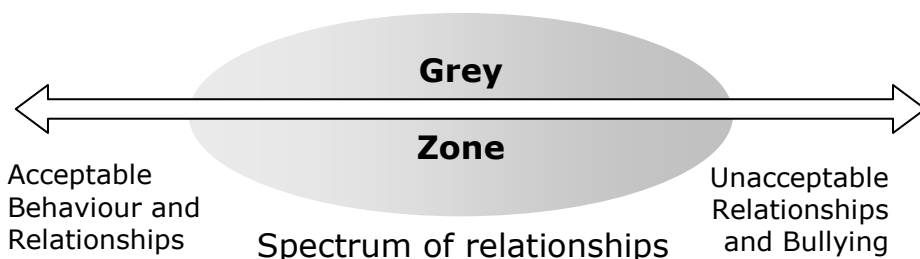
Box Approach – People and behaviours are placed in a box, distinct and unrelated to alternatives.

Using a spectrum approach we focus on using feedback as a method of preventing bullying and other harmful behaviours in the workplace. Supervisors can build strong, positive behaviours in their teams by giving feedback to people about how they relate and work with others. The feedback helps clarify, define and set targets for acceptable and constructive team performance. By drawing on corporate resources and the literature about

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identifying bullying and other destructive behaviours, supervisors can help pull people back out of the grey area before they move into clearly unacceptable behaviours that require disciplinary and legal action.



Spectrum Approach – People and behaviours move incrementally along a spectrum of choices between acceptable and unacceptable relationships and behaviours.

Supervisors can help people identify counter-productive behaviours and replace them with productive ones. They can draw people's attention to these, setting goals and coaching them. This can help prevent the repetition that would turn an incident of incivility into a pattern of bullying. Feedback, combined with coaching, can help turn actual or potential bullies around. Feedback and coaching can also guide bystanders and those bullied to strengthen them and help them resolve their dilemmas.

Mental Health, Non-task Issues and Stress

There are some things feedback cannot fix. However, the feedback process may alert supervisors to issues so they can mobilise the resources needed to address them.

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There are some mental health issues, if left untreated, can make it difficult for a person to process information or focus on work. If you ever have concerns that this is the case then contact your HR people straight away to see what can be done to help the person. The sooner qualified support is provided the sooner the workplace can resume its balance.

Personal and professional issues can also escalate in a person's life and undercut their capacity to work well and respond to feedback. When supervisors try to provide feedback they can end up in the role of counsellors. Even if the supervisor is a qualified counsellor it is still probably the wrong role as there are obvious conflicts of interest. Many organisations have standing arrangements with providers who can offer counselling to support a person during these intense periods of their lives.

In high stress situations it can be misguided for supervisors to try and resolve all stress factors using feedback. Some stressors do result from how people go about their work or function in a team. Other stressors are the result of business or environmental factors. Giving feedback might sometimes help staff cope with some of these stressors. However, better results are more likely if the supervisor focuses on receiving feedback about the stressors and possible solutions. Engineering or redesigning activities to exclude stressors may make it possible to remove some stressors altogether.

Performance Management and Feedback

Effective feedback models rely on more than actual feedback events. As discussed in the *Frequency and Effectiveness* section earlier, effective feedback needs to link to other business and performance management processes. The model shown here is one of many that help with feedback. It is an example of how simple it can be to link into other processes.

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FOCUS

There are various models around that leaders can use to structure their approach to feedback and managing performance. This is one approach that is typical. It is a cooperative approach to building performance that aims to avoid an me versus you result.

- F**ocus Identify what it is you want to focus on with the person that will lead to better performance. It is best to keep to one thing at a time so people are not overwhelmed or confused.
- O**bserve Pay attention to what is happening, including what people do, the effect it has, the effort it takes and the consequences. Stick to what is observable and don't jump to conclusions or judgements. If the situation is frustrating or upsetting, work to detach your personal feelings from your observations.
- C**onsult Spend time talking and listening to the person or group involved. Get their view of what is happening. Check your observations and find common ground where you can both agree about what is happening and what needs to change. You might find you have to modify some of your assumptions.
- U**nite Join with the other person to develop steps that can improve the situation. Improvement will only come if the other person feels convinced the steps are worth doing. You may have to coach and direct at times, give encouragement or calmly insist, depending on the situation. If the other person comes up with practical steps, even if they are not your preferred approach or style, be prepared to move forward with them.
- S**core Work out with the person or group a way of tracking progress and then track it. Make sure it is easy to measure and based on observable outcomes, not impressions. The best measures are those generated as part of normal operations. Track

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frequently, meeting together to check progress and adjust plans as needed. Make sure you keep giving the message that you mean no harm. The tracking is about making sure you both protect your investment, effort and outcome. Once the change has been established, you can drop back the frequency of tracking and meeting. If necessary, you can then move onto another improvement opportunity.

Core Skills

Building a Culture of Feedback

Building a culture of feedback is often overlooked in workplaces. It is important to always be on the lookout to build trust so people can share information in constructive ways. Giving positive feedback regularly is important if you want people to accept critical feedback when it is necessary. Otherwise, people can avoid issues by treating feedback as an attack.

It is also important for the supervisor to seek feedback. This demonstrates that the supervisor believes feedback is a valuable process and not one to be feared. It is important that the supervisor then acts on the feedback, otherwise the message is sent that feedback doesn't link to results or behavioural change. A large part of the credibility of the feedback process will always rest on the supervisor's own attitude to it.

A culture of feedback helps people accept that they do not always see themselves the way others do. As Cannon and Witherspoon put it:

A lengthy history of psychological research demonstrates that people tend not to view themselves accurately, and they are not good at accurately perceiving how others are seeing them. Specifically, they see themselves more positively than others see them; thus, critical

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feedback is likely to appear inaccurate, and receivers are likely to disagree with it. (Cannon and Witherspoon, 2005)

A culture of feedback works to build trust within the group so people accept information about themselves. This can sometimes be about reminding people how well they are doing. People with high self-demand or low self-esteem can overlook how well they do.

Another element that Cannon and Witherspoon highlight is that feedback givers and feedback receivers can both find it hard to work out how their own thoughts and feelings colour the messages. This is true for the assumptions by the feedback giver about what the feedback is based on. It is also true for the feedback receiver about what the feedback means. They encourage actionable feedback, based on the review of demonstrated actions or choices.

Designing Constructive Steps

Solution focus and problem solving is a key skill for giving feedback. This does not mean supervisors have to solve everything. Part of feedback is helping staff develop their solution focus and problem solving ability.

It is important for supervisors to remember that they are limited by their own perceptions of a situation. Supervisors are not external observers but a part of the business and social system with their staff. As such, they view it from the inside, so cannot assume they have a full or impartial understanding of the situation. Getting input from an external sounding board can help here. Sometimes third party instruments can help, for example team role profiles or competency assessments, by providing structured, independent input. However, it is no substitute for working through the issues.

Chris Argyris' *Ladder of Inferences* model can help supervisors check their perspective as well as help them work through assumptions with their staff. Argyris' model provides a simple description of how we reach our conclusions from the, usually, small amount of information available to us.

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Ladder of Inference

4th Rung – Conform to existing assumption

People adapt their interpretations to fit their existing understanding of how things work.

3rd Rung – Impose meaning

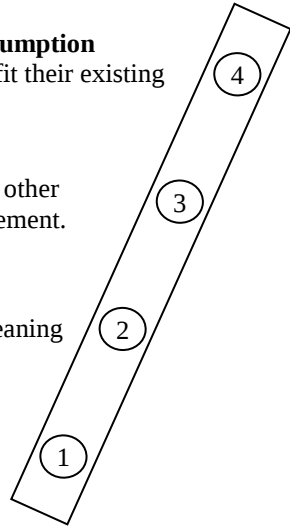
People add their interpretation of what the other person/s intended. They may include judgement.

2nd Rung – Infer meaning

People interpret what they observe and apply meaning to it. This takes a fraction of a second.

1st Rung – Observe Data

This could be a conversation or event. It provides the person with information to work with.



A feedback situation might look like this, from the point of view of the feedback recipient.

1 st Rung	My boss says customer X our most important customer for the next three months and that it is important that I build on the work I have already done with this customer.
2 nd Rung	I will be evaluated based on what I do with customer X, who is now our most important customer.
3 rd Rung	I had better focus on customer X and put some of my other work aside. Customers Y and Z can wait a little longer until my boss is satisfied with customer X results.
4 th Rung	My pattern of work is good as my boss said 'build on the work I have already done.' Since I tend to focus on one thing at a

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time, I will not follow up (what I think are) non-urgent inquiries from other customers but spend my time with customer X.

It is not hard to see where the next feedback session will go. More importantly, this sequence of thought is natural and not uncommon.

Focus on Strengths

Another element for designing constructive steps is to focus on strengths and potential to help make the individual and the team stronger. Many significant contributors to leadership development, from Peter Drucker, through David Cooperrider to Marcus Buckingham, promote this approach. A focus on weaknesses can end up with people working on their weakest areas rather than their strengths. This leaves organisations with unrealised strengths.

Buckingham suggests a six step approach to maximising strengths. This includes frequent planning by staff and conversations with their supervisor about what their strengths are and how they can maximise them on a weekly basis. It also includes finding ways to minimise the amount of time staff spend doing those things that are their weaknesses. Obviously every job requires that people have to do some things that are not their strengths. The trick is to find ways that these job requirements don't eat into utilising the person's strengths. If a person is in a job that requires them using their weaknesses most of the time then either the job needs to be redesigned or the person is in the wrong job.

The six steps are:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Myths | What beliefs or norms keep you focused on weaknesses instead of developing your strengths? What is stopping you from changing this? |
| Clarify | Get clear about your strengths. Identify them, clarify them and confirm them. |

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Free	Build plans and opportunities to use your strengths to improve your work and performance. This includes close feedback loops with supervisors.
Stop	Stop your weaknesses. Find ways to deal with those parts of your job that you are weak at so that you can use most of your time can use your strengths.
Team	Work with your team to cooperate so everyone can use their strengths. One person's weak area might be another's strengths
Habits	Build habits and practices that keep you focused on maximising your strengths and reducing the impact of things that would push you back on your weaknesses.

Matching Feedback to Situations

Hersey and Blanchard's work on situational leadership has proved a resilient and popular addition to the field of contingency leadership. This is an approach to leadership that says leadership styles and actions must adapt to the needs of the situation. Leaders sticking to their preferred style do not effectively lead people and organisations. Hersey and Blanchard applied this approach to they way needs change as staff move into new roles and responsibilities.

Put simply, a person typically moves through four phases when they take on a new role or responsibility.

1. **Start the new role or responsibility.** Confidence and emotional energy are high. They have just been affirmed as a successful candidate or someone to be trusted with new responsibilities. However, it is a new role or task, so they are untested in it. Even if they have done the job elsewhere it can take up to a year for a person to adapt to it in a new

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situation. So in the early phase a person is usually in a state of *unconscious incompetence*. This does not mean they are hopeless. It just means they are yet to discover the new elements of the role and how they are going to manage it. At this point in time the person does not need a lot of emotional support but they do need a lot of task support and feedback so they can get into the job.

2. **Discover the challenges of the new role or responsibility.** As the person gets into the tasks they start to discover the things they don't know, how the culture differs from their previous situation, the new demands and where they need to develop new skills. This can be unsettling and their previous high enthusiasm can plummet and they feel less confident while they adjust to the role. They have moved from unconscious to *conscious incompetence*. They are now coping with their short-comings in the role rather than celebrating the success of earning the role. During this period they still need a lot of task support and feedback but now they need emotional support and feedback. It is during this phase that a person is most likely to think taking on the role was a mistake and want to quit. The supervisor can support them both emotionally and in learning how to do the role to make it more likely they will remain and become a valued contributor to the team.
3. **Learning and building confidence in the role.** As the person becomes more practiced in the role their skills grow. They experience more success and become more proficient at the job. They are building competence but cannot take it for granted yet. This is a phase of *conscious competence*. Here the supervisor starts to reduce the amount of task oriented support as the person acquires more of the skills and knowledge they need. However, it is still a learning process with surprises and setbacks. The person still needs emotional support and feedback.
4. **Competent, confident and successful in the role.** Finally, if the leader has helped the person through the phases, they end up with a person who can do the job. The experience of their success in the role generates the positive emotions the person needs to sustain their performance. They can do the job without any fuss or consternation. They are now *unconsciously competent*. They now need little support from the leader,

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either emotionally or task-wise. This does not mean that the leader ceases to give feedback or abandons the person. Rather, it means this situation can now take its place with all the other ongoing activities of the supervisor-staff relationship and feedback practices.

The different types of support and feedback the supervisor provides can be summarised as follows:

Phase	Staff Situation	Supervisor Focus
1	Unconscious incompetence	High task Lower emotion
2	Conscious incompetence	High task High emotion
3	Conscious competence	Lower task High emotion
4	Unconscious competence	Low task Low emotion

Hersey and Blanchard have developed many resources for managers to access and read to build their capacity as situational leaders. Blanchard has also developed a variation on the model labelled Situational Leadership II.

Language

The language used during feedback can make all the difference. This includes reading the cues from the other person because words can mean different things to different people. If you find a person is reacting negatively, it maybe due to the words you are using and not their attitude to improving performance. Even if you have a person with a negative attitude to

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performance improvement, some carefully selected words and messages may help you both get past this obstacle and the reasons behind it.

Some key concepts for choosing your language are:

Non-threatening, non-appealing	Particularly important for tense or conflict situations, make your language as calm, neutral and non-judgemental as possible.
Sensitive and respectful	Keep the language matched to the person. Some people respond well to blunt language, others to more refined language. It is important to match to the personality of the person but at all times, keep your language professional and respectful. Swearing at a person seldom gets good results!
Inclusive	Be aware of cultural, genders, age and occupational factors. The language must show it understands and respects the background of the person. Technical jargon is only useful if you are talking with someone experienced in the same technical field.
Non-catastrophic or escalating	While matching the tone of a person is important it is even more important to be alert to when the language is making the conversation more volatile. While trained negotiators sometimes take the risk of out escalating above another person to bluff them back down to a calm conversation, this is a high risk strategy most of the time. Usually you need to keep your own language calm and as the other person intensifies you can paraphrase using more constructive phrases.
Factual, not generalising	Be as specifically as you can. Words like 'always', 'never', 'they' or even 'must' or 'should' can cover up what is really going on. They take you into the realm of generalisations. Using specific language helps people focus on actual issues they can make choices about.

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Clear and Specific Content

The content of the feedback needs to be specific. Often times we say things that ‘feel’ specific but on analysis of the language or content they turn out to be generalisations or vague ideas. For example, the statement, ‘You need to manage customers better,’ seems specific but is actually quite vague. What is it the person does with customers that must change? What is the impact on customers or the business from what they currently do? What actions and steps are you actually wanting the person to take?

Cannon and Witherspoon list five attributes of flawed feedback:

1. Attacks the person rather than the person’s behaviour
2. Vague or abstract assertions
3. Without illustrations
4. Ill-defined range of application
5. Unclear impact and implications for action

An example of these would be feedback that went:

You must be the most difficult employee I’ve ever supervised (1). I really can’t trust you (2). You act unprofessionally (4) and I’ve had enough. So sort yourself out or I will have to escalate things (5).

Notice that (3) wasn’t included because the whole statement lacked illustrations. With feedback like this, how is a person meant to emotionally connect and cognitively decide what to do to improve their performance?

Defining Expectations

Without clear expectations people cannot perform well. But expectations are not ultimatums. They are a point of common ground between the supervisor

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and staff person or group so they can understand each other and work together. Clear expectations usually follow the well known SMART principles.

S pecific	specific, significant, stretching
M easurable	measurable, meaningful, motivational
A greed	agreed upon, attainable, achievable, acceptable, action-oriented
R ealistic	realistic, relevant, reasonable, rewarding, results-oriented
T ime-based	time-based, timely, tangible, trackable

Expectations do not just cover the tasks to be done. They also address the way people are to go about those tasks. This includes their conduct towards others, their professional presentation and language, how they contribute to the team and how they are to prioritise their work in the face of competing demands. Health and safety is always an element of defining expectations. It is a non-negotiable priority in every workplace. Expectations can also include the relationship with the supervisor and when a person is to escalate issues.

Hattie and Timperley propose that three questions are important for effective feedback. Effective feedback is about reducing discrepancies between current understanding/performance and desired goals. The questions are:

1. Where am I going? (The goals)
2. How am I going?
3. Where to next?

They then suggest four levels that feedback processes work at while helping people learn:

T ask	How well tasks are understood and performed
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P rocess	The main processes needed to understand and perform tasks
S elf-regulation	Self-monitoring, directing and regulating of actions
S elf	Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner.

Clarifying Understanding

People sometimes find themselves in the situation where they have finished a conversation and found the other person then goes and does something completely unexpected. They may have thought they even had an agreement and the other person has deliberately misled them or broken it.

What can happen is that people operate out of different levels of understanding about what was being communicated. Grondin suggests three levels of understanding, based on the work of Gadamer, who studied how people interpret things. If an agreement is important out of a conversation then it is important to clarify what is understood and how it is being understood.

The three levels of understanding are:

C oncept	“I get it!” People can comprehend the ideas, facts and processes being described. They understand the words and what they think the other person means.
U tility	“I can use that.” At this level the information becomes practical. It goes beyond the meaning of the words. People understand it as something they can use. They can apply it and act on it

Notes



Agreement “We have an understanding.”

This is when the parties involved in the message agree on it. A person not only gets what it means and how to use it, they agree that this is something they will do or adopt. The policy, process or task is not only understood conceptually or practically. It is now something they commit to and both parties have a common assumption about what comes next.

It is also important to remember that agreement on facts is important before people can interpret and choose what to do with them. When people disagree on the facts they are hardly likely to agree on the consequences or steps to address them. This can be true of positive feedback as well as critical feedback. A person who refuses to believe they did anything useful is unlikely to accept praise for it.

A simple formula is to first describe the facts, ie. what you observed the person doing. Then describe the consequences. Once there is agreement on these then the step to praise, strengthening or problem-solving can happen.

Using Resistance

Feedback can reinforce some practices and behaviours and change others. One element of change is that people can resist it. Ford and Ford identified five ways that resistance can be used constructively during change. This can also be relevant in the context of supervisor feedback.

Awareness Sometimes people react to the fact they don't know how leaders reach their decisions. People are concerned how decisions will impact on them. So they reject the decision. This is an opportunity for supervisors to boost awareness of the reasons for their decisions. The supervisor may also discover shortcomings in their decisions and where they need to educate and explain.

Notes



Purpose	Resistance to demands that have no clear purpose is an understandable and rational response by people. If supervisors cannot make their purpose clear then maybe they need to reconsider what their purpose really is. Resistance is an opportunity to return to and explore the purpose of decisions. The decisions of supervisors impact on people's lives and how they go about their work.
Improvement	Committed people will object to decisions they believe undermine their work and the future of the organisation. This type of resistance may show a need to change the decision. Rather than label them troublemakers, supervisors may be wiser to engage in open conversation to find improvements.
Participation and engagement	Resistance can be a sign that people feel excluded. While some leadership decisions are best made by the supervisor alone, others are better done by engaging the affected people in the decision process. Sometimes shop floor ideas can find solutions and gain traction in ways that top down decisions can't.
Resolve unresolved issues	Resistance can expose lost trust and doubts about the legacy of previous supervisor decisions, even if the actual supervisor has changed. Past failures and hurts must be acknowledged and resolved if people are to trust current and future supervisors. When past failures cannot be reversed then they must become opportunities for learning with the lessons integrated into current decisions.

Defensiveness on the part of the recipient of feedback can also be due to several characteristics of the feedback itself. In this case, the resistance itself is a form of feedback to the supervisor about the quality of the feedback provided. Some triggers for apparent resistance are:

1. **The feedback is poorly crafted** (see the attributes of poor feedback above). The person finds it hard to make sense of the feedback or to

Notes



use it to plan actions. In this case, focus on using specific examples with clear choices for action.

2. **The feedback contradicts other feedback.** For example, in feedback session one the supervisor says, “Your reports are too detailed. Make them simpler.” In feedback two months later the supervisor says, “You aren’t giving me the information I need. How can I manage stakeholder issues if I don’t have the information.” In cases like these the recipient is trying to respond but, like a pendulum, swinging from one extreme to another. The feedback itself lacks clarity about balance. In this case, remember that each feedback event is part of an ongoing stream of feedback. Recalling past feedback may help identify where confusion is coming from.
3. **The feedback is unfocused.** The supervisor, while dealing with one issue, takes the opportunity to address related issues of lesser importance. Because they are less important they do not trigger their own feedback events. As a consequence, the important issue gets clouded and the way to deal with it becomes unclear. The person is left with a grab bag of information with no obvious priorities. In this situation, review the structure of your own feedback and prioritise the issues.

Like most other communication situations, simplicity and focus will always be useful.

Communication Techniques

Communication is a whole skill set that a people can dedicate their lives to. It is a skill set important for many roles and especially for giving and receiving feedback.

Bob Dick has put together two guiding frameworks that many people have found useful to help them communicate well. It becomes obvious that listening and acknowledging the other persons feelings and priorities are critical

Notes



foundations for good communication. Trying to bypass these to get 'straight to the point' may actually prevent effective communication happening at all.

LACE

This list has a clear order. For example, if you listen well and acknowledge to the person what you are hearing, you may not need to advance to check or enquire. This is because they will already confirm or clarify your understanding of what they said. Enquiry always comes last because asking questions starts to direct the conversation around your thoughts and priorities. This can mean you are moving out of the listening role and moving towards the role of speaker, getting the person to respond to your ideas and agenda.

Listen This is active listening. Listen to understand the other person, not just the ideas, but their experience, feelings and beliefs. Your goal is to build a comprehensive image of where the person is coming from, what is important for them and what are the likely issues and opportunities for reaching a good outcome with them.

Acknowledge This is letting the person know that you are hearing and taking in the information they are sharing with you. This is not only the factual information conveyed in their words, but also the values, feelings and importance they attach to it. Restating to them, especially when you use the same words they use, can reaffirm for them that you hear what they say and take it in. This will build confidence in the conversation.

Check Check with the person that you have understood them. This can be a flow on from how you acknowledge what they say, by making clear you are interpreting what you hear and want to make sure you are interpreting correctly. You want to let the person know you want them to clarify anything you are not hearing the way they intended.

Notes



Enquire This is a final option after the previous steps have run their course. You may not need to make inquiries but if there are areas you are uncertain about you can carefully ask questions that invite them to provide you with more detailed and specific information. While you are in the listening role these are questions that lead the person to clarify what it is they want to communicate.

FIDO

This is not so much a sequence of steps but a set of priorities for problem solving conversations.

Feelings are at the top because whenever they are active they trump everything else. Left unaddressed, feelings can interfere with the other parts of problem solving conversations.

The other priorities can follow a sequence where they start from the bottom of the list from outcomes to information then work their way back down again. The difference is that on the way up participants are defining what is needed and on the way back down they are then meeting those needs.

Feelings Always address feelings. The goal is to generate feelings that are positive about self, outcomes, process and others while reducing strongly negative feelings. This allows the exchange of information.

Information Information is useful when it is when it is specific, adequate, accurate, relevant and understood and accepted by those involved. The aim is to build a clear set of information that people can acknowledge as valid and relevant. This makes effective decisions possible.

Notes



- D**ecisions Decisions become effective if they have the commitment of those affected, specify who does what and when, and include monitoring and coordination. This makes the outcome likely.
- O**utcomes The results people want to achieve and are willing to work towards.

A particular conversation may flow like this, remembering that at any time feelings may emerge that need to be addressed:

1. [Outcomes] Agree on the outcomes that the conversation is about, ie. what people want to achieve through this conversation.
2. [Decisions] Identify and clarify any decisions they will have to make to reach those outcomes.
3. [Information] Identify and define the information that is needed to make those decisions.
4. [Information] Gather and build the information needed for the decisions.
5. [Decisions] Use the information to make the decisions.
6. [Outcomes] Check that the decisions are delivering the desired outcomes.

To ensure feelings are not being overlooked, it is important to check for them throughout the conversation. Even as the steps proceed, a simple, open-ended question can help, such as, “How do you feel about that?”

Open Feedback Sandwich

Many people are familiar with the concept of the feedback sandwich. It is a technique people use when they have to give critical feedback.

Notes



In its most common form it is presented as Positive-Negative-Positive. The idea behind this is that starting with a positive can build rapport with the person and show that you mean them no harm. The critical feedback is then dealt with, on the assumption the person will respond more positively because of the prior positive feedback. After the negative feedback the process finishes with some more positive feedback. Again the idea is that the person is affirmed and leaves understanding that the negative feedback was not an attack but a genuine attempt to help improve performance. It also is meant to leave the person feeling a little more positive after a difficult conversation.

There is some criticism of this approach on the grounds that once the negative feedback starts the person will immediately forget the positive feedback, making it useless. It can also teach people to be suspicious about positive feedback because they start to expect something negative to follow. This can make it harder for people to hear and act on positive feedback when it is given.

An alternative is to have an open feedback sandwich. In an open sandwich the negative feedback is given first and the positive feedback follows. It shares many of the assumptions of the other form of feedback sandwich. What makes it different is it leaves the positive feedback until after the critical feedback has been addressed and resolved. This means the person is not going to be suspicious of positive feedback. When it does come it comes as the final word.

Each supervisor has to determine what type of sandwich to use. But the critical elements are that feedback needs to be in a context where the supervisor can demonstrate they mean no harm and want to help the staff person perform. The other element is that positive feedback is an important element to help people resolve critical feedback.

Notes



Self-Management

Emotions and Beliefs

Throughout the feedback process it is important to manage and address your own assumptions and beliefs about what is going on. These will govern your emotions and how you relate to the person you give feedback to.

Whenever you find your emotions active it is important to pause and ask about what you believe is going on, your assumptions about the other person and your concerns about the outcomes. Often times we come into a situation already anticipating what will happen. We then interpret what actually happens through the filter of our assumptions. This can lead to misinterpretations and undermine the chance of a good outcome.

Always pay attention to your feelings and check the validity of the thoughts and beliefs behind them.

Personal Development, Self-review and Soliciting Feedback

Hill and Kent conducted research that shows many managers focus on their performance early in their time in the role. As time goes by they stop asking the questions necessary to help them perform. If supervisors are to provide feedback and ask staff to improve they need to demonstrate their own commitment to their own performance.

Hill and Kent provide three areas to focus on that will help:

1. Manage yourself: Influence comes from people's trust in your competence and character.

Notes



2. Manage your network: Engage the whole organisation to create the conditions for you and your team to succeed.
3. Manage your team: Build a high-performing ‘we’ approach within your team.

Reviewing how you perform in these areas and seeking feedback can build your credibility and capability as a supervisor and leader.

Adapting the Supervisor Role to Teams

Research by Griffin, Patterson and West raises some serious issues for supervisors as they work with teams. While the label ‘teams’ can be a cliché applied to all work groups, it can be applied more specifically to groups that have higher autonomy in their roles combined with high levels of cooperation between team members in their work. In these situations people don’t link job satisfaction to supervisor support the way other groups do, where staff have stronger links to the supervisor and work more independently of each other. The catch is that supervisor support is still shown to be a significant factor in job satisfaction for teams.

The challenge for supervisors is how to continue to provide support in a team setting, with its high level of autonomy. Supervisors will have to assess the type of group they supervise and develop different styles to provide support. For example, in groups where individuals rely more on direct relationships with their supervisor and work independently of each other, one-to-one feedback may be more important. Where groups work interactively as teams with greater autonomy from their supervisor, giving group feedback may be more important. At all times, supervisors must develop their ability to determine what type of group or sub-groups they have and match feedback styles.

Notes



Planning Feedback

In the workbook that accompanies this workshop there is a section for planning feedback.

There is no single way to plan feedback. This reference book takes you through important elements to include in your planning and delivery of feedback.

Some key elements to remember when planning feedback are:

1. Feedback has to part of your overall leadership and business systems to increase its effectiveness.
2. More frequent feedback is more effective the less frequent feedback.
3. Positive feedback gets more performance outcomes than negative feedback.

Notes



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