

Give Employee Feedback With Confidence

Ten tips to effectively communicate feedback to help employees grow and improve.

BY HEIDI PESTERFIELD

Discussing unsatisfactory work performance with an employee isn't a task any manager relishes. In fact, some managers will do anything to avoid or minimize such interactions, making it awkward for both parties when a discussion finally becomes necessary. But without honest feedback, employees are denied the opportunity to grow and improve. Rather than fear such interactions, managers can gain confidence in the feedback process by learning an effective style to which employees are responsive.

10 TIPS FOR BEST OUTCOMES

For best outcomes, utilize these tips when giving feedback to employees whose behavior does not measure up to practice standards:

- 1 **Be Discreet.** A private room is the only appropriate place to give feedback relating to poor performance, whether during a formal review or an unscheduled discussion. Criticizing an employee in front of other staff members is humiliating for the employee. In an effort to save face in front of peers, employees might be more defensive than they would be in private.
- 2 **Be Timely.** For feedback to be most effective, present it to the employee as soon as the need arises. While it may be tempting to postpone the interaction, waiting could increase the frustration and intolerance levels of those involved, resulting in a potentially more difficult encounter. Additionally, details surrounding an incident or situation are bound to fade when constructive feedback is postponed.
- 3 **Give Praise First, but Move on Quickly.** It's nice to be acknowledged for work well done, so start off by briefly mentioning a positive aspect of the employee's performance. This can inspire instant receptivity and a willingness to improve. Just be careful not to ramble on in an effort to postpone the criticism, otherwise the intended objective will be misunderstood. Here's an example of how to phrase feedback that begins with praise: "Gina, you've learned the scheduling system fast and I know everyone appreciates that you are a quick learner. Now I'd like to discuss ways we can improve your phone interactions with patients. I've observed in the past two weeks that you are struggling with...."
- 4 **Be Gentle but Direct.** A good manager is adept at presenting constructive feedback in a gentle yet direct manner without getting emotionally involved. Postponing, sugarcoating, or downplaying the truth will only hamper an employee's ability to achieve success in his or her position. On the other hand, the manager is not there to intimidate, scold, belittle, or shame employees into changing their behavior. The job of the manager is to calmly state the facts and then help the employee find a solution.
- 5 **Specify.** The more specific the feedback, the more chance the employee has of understanding—and correcting—the exact problem. Here are two examples: "Karen, a few patients recently mentioned to me that you weren't very friendly on the phone." This example is not as specific as it could be and may not be as effective as feed-

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back with more information. Usually messages this vague are the result of a manager trying to “soften the blow” so the employee doesn’t feel too badly about the criticism. Unfortunately, this is a great disservice to staff members who deserve to know as much as appropriately possible about the problem so they can correct the behavior. Here is a better example: “Karen, I received calls from two patients last week complaining about telephone conversations they had with you. They used the words ‘rude’ and ‘agitated’ to describe your demeanor, and one of the patients said she would not be returning to the practice.”

6 Allow the Employee Time to Confirm the Feedback. Solicit input from employees, and listen to their full feedback. A neutral way of allowing the employee to confirm the details of the issue is: “Is this a fair representation of the situation...?” It is important that the manager and employee reach agreement with the issue before deciding on a solution. It is impossible to enact a plan for improvement for an employee who disagrees on the issue.

7 Remain Objective and Fair. It is a mistake for managers to assume all explanations are excuses that prevent employees from taking responsibility. Sometimes there are valid reasons why an employee is not performing at the level a manager expects. It is up to the manager to listen to explanations objectively before reaching any conclusions.

8 Collaborate to Determine the Solution. Once in agreement over the issue, discuss problem-solving ideas with the staff member and together decide on a concrete action plan for improvement. Employees are more likely to follow through with action steps if they help develop the plan. They are also more likely to point out potential barriers for improvement that the manager might

not know about. A manager seeking an employee’s collaboration might ask, “What steps do you think you need to take to move through these difficulties, Laura?”

9 Support the Employee. Make sure the employee has the tools and support necessary to change. For example, an employee who is experiencing difficulty juggling phone answering duties with other front office tasks might request a hands-free headset that allows her the ability to multitask better. Consider asking the employee, “What do you need from me (or the practice) to support you in making this change, Jessica?”

10 Document and Follow Up. Obviously not all constructive feedback needs to be documented, but in many instances it does. At a minimum, take notes so that the employee’s progress can be monitored and followed up on in a timely manner. When managers do not follow up, employees develop a “why bother?” attitude resulting in decreased respect of the manager’s authority.

FEEDBACK FOR SUCCESS

The employee feedback process need not be demonized. If employees don’t receive feedback on a regular basis, how will they know how to improve? When will they be given the opportunity to grow? By utilizing these tips, the process will be easier for managers and is more likely to be received well by employees. ■

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PRACTICAL POINTER

Providing constructive feedback is the first necessary step in helping employees improve and grow. But once the feedback is shared, follow-up is key. Provide feedback on a regular basis and take notes so employee progress can be monitored, and follow-up feedback can be given so employees know if they’ve improved or if there is still an issue.