

Organizational Advisor

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Enhancing employee performance with regular feedback

Providing employees with feedback is an important part of every supervisor's job. People need to know what they're doing right or wrong and how they can do better. But often managers provide ambiguous details or no positive reinforcement. Let's look at how to give workers feedback to improve their performances.

Avoid vague remarks

Supervisors may think they're protecting workers' feelings by providing fuzzy feedback. But they may actually worsen matters with vague comments that cause workers to become frustrated and defensive, which may increase existing problems or lead to other ones.

Here's an example. During a performance review, a manager tells an employee, "You have an attitude problem." When the worker asks about this comment, the manager replies: "This is exactly what I'm talking about." After the meeting, the staff member is angry and confused.

What could the supervisor have done differently? He or she should have prepared specific examples of poor performance and given constructive feedback. For instance: "I noticed on Monday that you were curt with a customer and interrupted almost every time she spoke. And on Wednesday, you refused to help your co-worker research a lost customer order. Employees in every department must be polite and helpful at all times."



Having been given a detailed explanation, the poorly performing worker now understands what specific behavior is unacceptable and what actions are expected. He or she can use this information to change and avoid repeating these incidents.

How to take the sting out of bad news

At some point in your career, you'll have to provide upsetting feedback to a worker. To some extent, how an employee handles criticism depends on the way you deliver it. Here are some tips to help you relay bad news:

- Meet with employees privately.
- Treat workers with respect and honesty.
- Provide details and examples of how their performances negatively affect your organization.
- Ask them how they'll address issues.
- Outline reasonable and measurable goals for improvement and set appropriate timelines.
- Find out what additional resources employees may need.
- Set dates to discuss progress.
- Make sure they want to continue working for your business.

Provide positive comments

Some managers operate under the "no news is good news" maxim — only discussing issues with employees when they make mistakes. But these supervisors are surprised when star workers lose their enthusiasm or their performances falter. Sharing positive feedback boosts morale and productivity and reinforces your organization's standards.

When complimenting an employee, give details. Instead of saying he or she did a great job on a project, say something like: "The report you wrote was terrific. I really liked how you separated each product line. It made the report easier to read." This conveys that you value an easy-to-follow report. So the next time you ask this employee for similar work, he or she will deliver the same level of quality or higher.

Maintain ongoing dialogue

Many managers would be satisfied to discuss performance issues only once a year. But they might not feel the same way if they spoke regularly with their employees and, consequently, witnessed them making greater strides more often — it's easier for workers to regularly adjust their performances rather than radically change them once a year. Supervisors would also see employees discussing their concerns and regularly evaluating themselves, which in turn boosts morale and performance. Plus, managers can build rapport and trust with workers, making it easier to deliver bad news.

Regular one-on-one meetings are a great way to let employees know how they're doing, but don't limit your dialogue to such meetings. When you see employees doing a great job, tell them so and how their actions positively affect your organization. Meanwhile, when workers fail to meet expectations, tell them immediately and point them in the right direction.

Keep performance files

Can you recall which employee did a less-than-stellar job on a project more than six months ago? You're not alone if your memory is hazy.

Establishing a performance file can help you track each worker's progress. So every time you see positive or negative behavior by an employee, discuss it and put a summary in the file. When it's time to conduct reviews, you won't struggle to recall details because you'll have plenty of data to accurately evaluate each worker's accomplishments or issues.

Master the art of feedback

It shouldn't be painful for you or your managers to give feedback, nor should workers be upset by criticism. By regularly providing employees with comments, supervisors should quickly become comfortable with this process and your staff will be able to work more efficiently. ‡‡

Back to school

Tuition reimbursement can build a brighter, more loyal work force

Many employers miss out on the advantages of tuition reimbursement because they mistakenly believe this is a benefit only large companies can afford. But providing workers with additional knowledge or enhancing their job skills helps you keep an edge on competitors and grow your business. So before you close the book on this subject, do some homework on how it can benefit you and ways to reduce costs in this area.

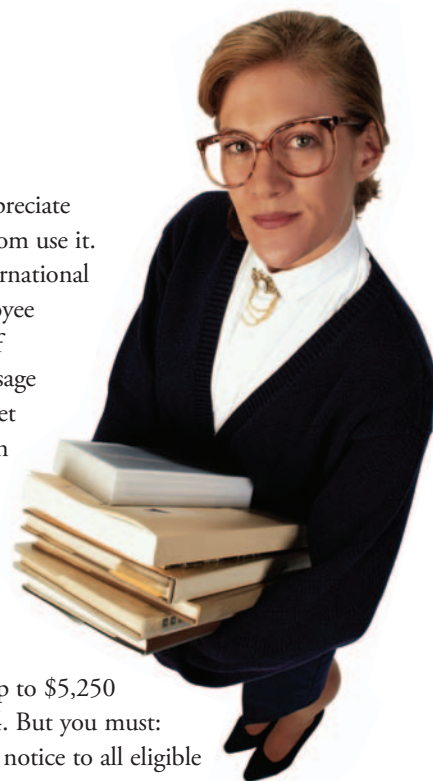
Investing in the future

Many businesses don't offer tuition assistance because they fear employees will flee their organizations immediately after completing their degrees or programs. But others realize that today's work force is mobile and satisfying employees' needs for personal development can help attract talented people and keep them longer.

Although workers appreciate this benefit, they seldom use it. According to the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, 66% of employers reported usage rates of 5% to 10% yet believe their education programs are very effective and are a valuable benefit.

Your business may even deduct tuition reimbursements — up to \$5,250 per employee in 2004. But you must:

- 1) provide reasonable notice to all eligible



workers about your tuition assistance plan, and 2) ensure that highly compensated employees and their spouses and dependents are not favored.

Tailoring a program

To keep expenses in line, tailor your tuition-reimbursement program to your needs and budget. Host training seminars or have workers attend workshops. Also consider these strategies:

Limit the type of education. Provide assistance only for undergraduate education, or for courses or degrees related to the worker's position.

Cap the reimbursement amount. Doing so can keep costs manageable and may even discourage employees from taking a full course load, which might interfere with their job responsibilities or ability to work overtime.

Apply a payback rule. This stipulation is an effective retention tool, because it requires employees to pay a portion of the reimbursement back to your business if they take advantage of this benefit and leave your organization within a certain period of time.

Extend the term-of-employment requirement. Increase the minimum term of employment workers must fulfill before they are eligible to participate in this benefit or offer it only to full-time staff.



Making the grade

Although advantageous for businesses and employees, tuition reimbursement can be costly. But educating your staff is important to helping your organization “make the grade” by staying competitive and profitable. 👥

The answers are right there Just ask your workers the right questions

Employee surveys can either help you improve your company or waste your time. Their success depends on how you implement them and what you do with the results.

An effective survey will open a window into workers' minds, letting in refreshing ideas on how to improve problem areas in your organization. Meanwhile, a poorly constructed or implemented survey can yield useless information and do more harm than good by creating unrealistic expectations and highlighting management's inability to address concerns.

Here are seven survey pitfalls and how to avoid them:

- 1. Magic-wand syndrome.** Managers believe that employee dissatisfaction or other issues will disappear once they ask workers for their opinions. But that is not the case. By surveying workers on issues your company has no plans to resolve or making no changes, you will only decrease morale. The best way to avoid the magic-wand syndrome is to be ready to take action.
- 2. Passive workers.** The staff believes management is responsible for fixing organizational problems and is waiting

for it to fail. Employees must be willing to work with supervisors to improve the company, and organizations should regularly solicit input from workers and involve them in resolving issues.

3. Mixed signals regarding confidentiality. To increase participation, employers promise to keep results confidential. But then they require workers to include their contact information to qualify for incentives for completing surveys. Doing so compromises the survey's integrity and gives the wrong message to your work force. Instead, provide a benefit (such as some time off) if a high enough percentage of employees participate.

4. Faulty surveys. Employers pose the wrong questions or offer inadequate response choices, yielding little information. Suppose you asked workers, "How satisfied are you with the management of this organization?" and the majority responded, "Dissatisfied." Unless you also learn *why* they're unhappy, you won't know how or where you should make improvements. Focus on your objectives for the survey and

Consider self-service surveys

Small to midsize companies with a limited budget may not be able to afford a full-scale custom survey, so they may administer internal surveys themselves. But there's another cost-efficient approach: self-service, partially customized surveys. Experts draft these standardized survey products but you get some customization. Plus, third parties administer the surveys.

construct questions to provide you with the details you need to address your survey goals.

5. Unrealistic expectations. Workers often think that because management is administering a survey, it will solve every issue right away. Help your staff better understand the survey process by creating a timetable for acting on the results. Also, let your staff know that you'll immediately handle a few matters, but others will take more time and you may not be able to resolve some.

6. A one-track mind. Companies ask too many questions about one topic, causing employees to assume that this particular area is more important than others. For example, if the majority of questions are about the company's leadership, your staff may mistakenly believe that the organization will be making significant changes in top management. So be sure to address topics equally unless you want to examine just one aspect of your organization.

7. Failure to benchmark. Businesses ignore the bigger picture. If you benchmarked your results against similar companies' you might find, for example, that a low score on satisfaction with employee management may be the norm or that workers often rate pay as "needs significant improvement." Comparing information to previous surveys you conducted or against other businesses' results will provide a broader look at problem areas.

Regardless of how often you survey your work force, evaluate your process. Ensure it drives business results, generates information you can use to improve your company and gives



Improve internal service

Create tough policies and generous incentives

Many organizations take great strides to improve customer service, but neglect to examine the service their employees provide each other — or internal customers. By failing to look at how your workers serve each other, you're missing opportunities to enhance your external clients' satisfaction.

How to improve internal service

Here's an example: Lock, Stock and Barrel Co.'s accounts payable department was always late in processing invoices. This affected its outside vendors and internal departments. How? Because purchasing didn't receive the raw materials on time, production workers fell behind schedule. The sales force was also unhappy with the accounts payable group because sales associates had to constantly appease customers dissatisfied with the company's lateness.

Eventually, the business hired a process-improvement consultant, who quickly identified several bottlenecks in the accounts payable department. Then the group began to regularly process vendor invoices on time, ultimately leading to greater satisfaction among customers and co-workers. Here are ways to foster your internal customer service:

Conduct an internal-customer survey. Ask employees about the timeliness, professionalism and service quality they receive from co-workers. To determine whether problems are department- or companywide, look for patterns.

Shift responsibility to employees. Sometimes the problem lies in workers' attitudes. For instance, some employees may be prone to finger pointing. When you see workers shifting the blame or complaining about an issue, ask them what they're contributing to the situation and how they would resolve the problem.

Examine worker behavior. Observe employee interactions throughout the organization, including encounters between subordinates and senior managers — particularly those between employees who don't work in the same department. Teams may be less focused because they're battling over turf.

Invest in your work force. Ensure employees have the tools they need to do their jobs and improve internal customer service. For instance, buy another printer for teams that share one and give workers computers that are appropriate for the amount and type of work they do. Also, train workers on how to improve processes and be more efficient.



Compensate for teamwork and internal customer service. Workers usually focus on areas where they'll receive additional compensation. With this in mind, incorporate teamwork and internal service objectives into compensation packages. But be sure goals are measurable.

For example, if a department receives a 10% improvement in its rating during the next external customer survey, give each employee a bonus of \$250.

Develop a recognition program. This is an inexpensive way to improve internal service and morale. And employees can help out: Establish a team to develop a recognition program.

Examine your hiring practices. Some workers are more adept at handling customers. See what characteristics they share and use this information when deciding which prospects to interview and hire.

Eliminate bad seeds. Although terminating workers who used to be stellar performers can be difficult, you may have no choice. Problem employees drag down morale and productivity.

How internal service affects your company

Taking a closer look at internal service in your organization can yield a number of benefits. Not only can you improve morale, but you may increase customer satisfaction and more. 👤👤

Ask the Advisor

Should you accommodate or eliminate workers who proselytize?

Dear HR Advisor:

We just hired a new accounting clerk and have already received complaints that she is preaching to co-workers. Yesterday, she sent a note to an employee — who is single and pregnant — predicting where she will meet her “maker.” I’ve talked with the proselytizing worker about her behavior, but she tells me she has the right. Is this true? What recourse, if any, do we have?

Signed,
Praying for a Speedy Answer

Dear Praying for a Speedy Answer:

Balancing a worker’s needs with your business objectives is a difficult task, and the law doesn’t provide a clear solution. Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employers must accommodate workers’ religious beliefs and practices as long as it’s reasonable to do so and not an “undue hardship” for the company. On the other hand, the law provides employees with the right to work in an environment free from religious harassment. In this situation, your business may be able to do both by:

Reviewing policies. Begin by taking a look at your anti-harassment policy (or creating one if you haven’t already) to ensure it clearly communicates your company’s position on employee harassment. Ensure the policy is as specific as possible and addresses all types of harassment, including verbal and physical abuse. Also, provide examples of questionable and unacceptable behavior.

Your organization’s values statement in your employee handbook is another good place to explain your expectations for worker behavior, including interactions with clients and vendors. Also, address the importance of mutual respect, courtesy and diversity.

Training workers. Sometimes employees have no idea they’ve crossed the line. Help your employees by hiring a professional to discuss hazy situations with them and role-play real situations. You can also show a training video on diversity and ask employees to handle minor situations themselves.

Taking action. Just as you would with harassment complaints, immediately investigate if an employee insists on proselytizing or making offensive, judgmental comments about co-workers, vendors or customers.

Also, review your code of conduct and harassment policy with the worker. Tell the employee that you understand he or she feels strongly about these beliefs but your organization believes in treating everyone with dignity and respect — you are within your rights to do so. Finally, ask the employee to share his or her opinions on controversial topics only outside of work.

Speaking with your lawyer. The person espousing his or her religious beliefs could claim he or she is being discriminated against because people espousing other beliefs that could be considered harassment aren’t being asked to stop. So before firing a worker, consult your attorney. 🧑🏻‍⚖️



From the CEO's Chair — Matching the Right Candidate to the Boss: A Case Study

Matching the right person to the right job is an acknowledged need in organizations. But one of the toughest challenges in selection often overlooked is matching the *right candidate* to their immediate *boss*. What makes that goal particularly tough is when the boss does not have a clue what kind of candidate would work well with them. The best rationale for giving consideration to the match between boss/employee is the voluminous research confirming that one of the primary contributing factors to turnover is the quality of the relationship between management and employees.

Situation:

A recent selection challenge involved a boss who had turned over several employees. Frustrated and stressed, out of desperation he responded favorably when the VP of Human Resources suggested that he use a behavioral assessment to achieve a better match for the position and with his own behavioral preferences.

Solution:

Utilizing a dynamic behavioral assessment that assesses 150 performance trait preferences and has a mechanism to match the candidate against position success templates, our consultant facilitated a selection process that involved assessing the boss' behavioral preferences, discussing the position requirements and selecting a position success template, and finally assessing candidates for an appropriate match to position and boss. The internal recruiting manager was responsible for sourcing and selecting candidates based on identified criteria, then administering the assessment to likely candidates, both internal and external. The assessment reports for the candidates that appeared to be a good fit were then reviewed by the consultant to evaluate the behavioral *match between boss and candidate*. The candidates prescreened as a good fit were then interviewed by the boss who utilized the assessment's report with *behavioral interview questions* which were specific to the position and customized for each candidate.

The process was demanding in that the recruiting manager did not have access to the boss' profile for confidentiality reasons so relied on the consultant's analysis for boss/candidate fit; the boss was very tough to match and required review of a number of candidates to find potential good fits; and the incumbent was aware of the impending change. With confidence in the process, however, the recruiting manager and consultant carefully screened candidates until a good behavioral fit was identified. Out of 12 candidates screened, 2 seemed probable matches and the boss selected one of them for the position.

Results:

After selecting the final hire, the boss received the assessment report on *how to manage* the new employee and the new employee received

their *behavioral preferences development report* to better understand their strengths and potential weaknesses in the new position. These provided excellent facilitation resources for development of the new boss/employee relationship.

Suitability

A high quality suitability assessment facilitated a successful boss/candidate match resulting in a 25:1 ROI. With the heightened emphasis on retention, what organization can afford to ignore such dramatic results?

As a result of this innovative selection process, the company, department of the hiring manager, HR, the boss and his newly hired employee gained these additional benefits:

- 🌱 The chances of selecting a poor fit were minimized, reducing the potential for another turnover.
- 🌱 The boss saved time by interviewing only candidates that were a good fit.
- 🌱 HR gained credibility because poor — fit candidates were screened out *before* reaching the boss.
- 🌱 Internal candidates who were not a good fit were not put at risk of being selected for a potentially poor — fit job/boss.
- 🌱 The boss learned more about his own behavioral preferences and strengths/ weaknesses.
- 🌱 The chosen candidate has a high probability of performing well and remaining in the position.

The bottom line savings on using an effective behavioral assessment in selection is significant including reduced interviewing time, reduced stress, improved performance, and reduced chances for turnover. Considering just the cost of turnover vs the cost of the assessment process, the ROI for this approach to matching the boss/subordinate was conservatively estimated at a return of 25 times the investment. Those savings go directly to the bottom line. With the heightened emphasis on retention, what organization can afford to ignore such dramatic results?

By Sheryl Dawson, CEO
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