

Feedback is not only about giving

Part II: Practising Feedback

Marti Janse van Rensburg

Last month, in part I, we looked at why feedback is important for learning, self-development and growth and also why it is so hard. We then looked at starting the process by being aware of how we react when we receive feedback.

In this, part II; we will look at how to prepare for and give feedback and how to turn feedback into practical results – both for you and for others.

Giving Feedback

I mentioned in part I that the most effective feedback is either done directly following the generating event and when the recipient can verify it with other group members to establish the validity there-of or alternatively when it is asked for.

The reality is that most companies and managers are very far from this ideal scenario. Feedback is typically scheduled as part of a performance review and might involve the use of a 360 process. This 360 process typically utilises a set questionnaire completed by several colleagues, direct reports, a boss (or seniors) and clients (or customers) and/or suppliers. Very often as the questionnaire is standardised for the entire company there are questions that are not applicable to all and that could create some confusion. In spite of these conundrums, the process can still yield valuable information and results.

I will therefore discuss giving feedback incorporating this formal process with or without the 360 questionnaire. The guidelines are also relevant for more informal feedback. I will look at how to prepare for the feedback and elements to consider in the feedback session.

Preparation for the discussion

- Gather all the data, facts and information. If need be, ensure that you have examples or critical incidents to highlight important points. This enables the recipient to make a concrete connection with what you are talking about and

makes the feedback more understandable. It also makes easier the identification of potential actions that can be taken to solve the problem. An example is the comment “Joe does not live the values”. This is too vague, rather give an example of which value and in what situation it was noted. This will enable Joe to make a connection and to suggest possible actions that can be taken.

- If there is a 360 report, go through it in detail and make sure that you can explain your own scores and comments as the individual’s line manager. You are probably the one participant in that questionnaire that cannot hide in a group.
- Have explicit evidence and reasoning that led you to your conclusion but do not be rigid and be prepared to change your mind. Your conclusion could be wrong.
- Consider what the recipient’s point of view might be. Try to understand where that person is coming from. Remember that most of us tend to assume that behaviour is an indication of the person’s personality and character and not influenced by context and we are often wrong when we assume that.
- Anticipate his/her possible responses to the feedback session but be prepared for the unexpected.
- Be sensitive to cultural, gender and age differences

During the feedback sessions

Setting the scene

- Set aside enough time to complete the discussion. You do not want to be rushed into finishing if either or both of you have other appointments waiting
- The meeting should be private and without interruptions. This would include cell phones and secretaries
- Use a congenial setting. A big desk between the two of you is not ideal. If you need a table to write on then use an empty coffee table rather than a desk where you only emphasise the boss/direct report hierarchy.

Be behaviour specific

Be specific about the behaviour that needs to be addressed and not the person. Feedback that is person specific tends to provoke an immediate defensive reaction; since it creates the impression that the person’s character is flawed. This

can have a negative impact on performance since it suggests that in order to change the person has to change fundamental personality characteristics, which is very difficult to do. Highlight the behaviour as well as the situation during which it occurred. (See preparation).

Stop and listen actively

Remember that as a rule of thumb you should listen more than you speak. It is important to not only hear but to really listen to what the person is saying and not saying. Rather than focus on your next response, concentrate on what the recipient is trying to communicate through body language, descriptions and metaphors.

Active listening is characterised by the following:

- Relaxed body posture - not forward and threatening or arms crossed and defensive
- Relaxed and intermittent eye contact - it is not a staring contest. However, do not break eye contact when a key word in the discussion arises for example 'conflict' or even when giving praise
- Be aware that your facial expressions might be seen as a judgement of some sort. When you frown it might be viewed as disagreement rather than not understanding. Your face should indicate a genuine interest in what the person has to say.

Showing Empathy

Empathy means to be able to listen and respond to the recipient's point of view. This does not mean that you have to be pulled into their logic if you do not want to. Neither do you have to weaken your own determination. It also indicates the ability to respond fairly to a new point of view or information that you did not have before. This will confirm the perception that you are genuinely listening. There is nothing more infuriating than perceiving that the other person is not listening to you. Empathy and mutual respect can even out the emotional temperature and avoid potential volatile reactions.

Avoid Hooks / Avoid using them

A hook is any kind of bait that will pull you into an argument that will lead nowhere or pull the focus away from the point being discussed. Here are some hooks:

- *Manipulative hook* is one that tries to make the other person feel guilty. “I work so much overtime and that is not appreciated” or “the company has invested so much money in your development”
- *Argumentative hook* is one that tries to provoke a row. “It is absurd to suggest that I do not live the values”
- *Irrelevant logic* sounds rational but does not stand up to any real scrutiny. “The company’s executives do not live the values either” “The company has never supported your type of leadership”

Reach an agreement about the issues on the table

It is very important to note that issues might be easy to identify but the underlying causes not. Make sure that the drive behind the behaviour is understood before an action plan is formulated. A comment such as “you are arrogant” can be construed as the person having too much self-esteem where in fact the opposite might be more accurate. The arrogant behaviour could be a front for low self-esteem. Make sure that the underlying issue is brought to the fore as it can affect the personal development plan quite drastically.

General considerations

Most people’s reactions to feedback can be described as unpredictable to say the least or in some cases volatile. Recipients have been known to become angry, storm out of the office, lash out verbally, physically attack and even in very rare instances kill the manager. Since our interpretation of behaviour differs, managers and subordinates can face significant disagreement regarding performance. During the feedback interview be aware of the possible underlying emotional and cognitive dynamics involved in the process as discussed in part I.

Also remember that the people, probably all direct reports, might be as nervous and anxious as you are, even if it is just about an impending performance review with you as their direct superior. Their reaction might be more indicative of them dealing with their own emotions than it is about you giving them feedback.

Evaluating and reflecting on the Feedback Process

Most managers are not taught about the emotional aspects of managing people. This is however a continuous growth and learning process. It is therefore imperative to evaluate your self after the feedback session.

Take a few minutes to reflect on how the session went, what worked and what not and what you could do different in future.

The Development Plan

There are many methodologies to create a development plan. Most companies require this to be an outcome of a performance discussion and/or a 360 process. Unfortunately this is often a quick 10-minute exercise and is then left in a drawer for the next discussion in 6 months or a year's time. Most companies also refer to a Personal Development Plan (PDP). My view is that a PDP should then be what is indicates – personal – and should therefore include elements that are personal to the individual. If the development areas are only company specific then it should be called a Work Development Plan or something similar.

The most effective development plan methodologies follow a circular process that relies on the individual to clarify no more than two or three clear goals or objectives, to take action, review the results, change the plan if necessary and then take action again. This process needs to be repeated until the desired result is achieved.

Behaviour Change

Changing behaviour is difficult for most if not all of us. Most people prefer life to be stable and change to be minimal. Furthermore if change in behaviour is required, we become defensive as we connect the required change with being flawed or wrong. It is useful to consider the following conditions when behavioural change is required, either for you or your direct reports:

- People will consider changing their behaviour if they can see the logic for the change and/or why it would be beneficial. It will not happen if the person does not agree that the change is necessary. This is where coaching, as a managerial skill, is important, as the recipient is not told what changes are needed but is encouraged to arrive at that decision by him or herself. It also helps if people can see how their behaviour might impact on others. If Joe's

subordinates doubt the company's values since Joe failed to demonstrate and live one of them, then Joe has a clearer understanding of why change is necessary.

- The surrounding structures (for instance reward and recognition) must be in place to support the new behaviour, reinforce it or reward it. An example would be that companies often require senior people to transfer knowledge. Yet at the same time we tell people that knowledge is power. In principle people are therefore expected to give their power away. This has to be done in addition to a heavy workload and the transfer of knowledge requirement is not rewarded where-as the rest of the workload often is. To make it more complicated, often the knowledge that needs to be transferred is exactly what will give the individual the edge in performing better and therefore getting a bigger increase or bonus. And we wonder why it doesn't happen?
- Employees must have the skills to make the required changes. If an employee needs to learn to resolve conflict but doesn't have the necessary skills; change will never take place - to the detriment of the company.

Putting your own development plan together

Here are some questions to ponder when you have received feedback from a 360 report. Some of these questions are also valid when given impromptu feedback or when you elicit feedback yourself.

- What is my initial reaction to the feedback?
- How do I feel? What am I thinking?
- Are there discrepancies between feedback received from different groups or different people?
- Is there a marked difference between how you view yourself and how others view you?
- Do the comments and the scores correlate when feedback is in the format of a 360 report?
- Are there instances where people chose not to rate you?
- Once you have studied and considered the feedback, what is your reaction?
- Is this reaction different from your initial reactions? If so, how?
- What did you learn about yourself?

- What do you want to change?

Set high goals for yourself but not totally unrealistic ones and typically not more than three at a time. We release serotonin (the brain chemical that makes you feel good) when we achieve goals that were hard to reach. Be specific about the goals and make sure it is within your control. An example would be that giving your child a good education is within your control but the child doing well is not.

Looking at strengths

We very often focus on our weaknesses and pay no attention to our strengths. Yet you would not consider the national soccer coach to be wise if he decided to take his best goal keeper and require him to suddenly work on his striking skills or if the national cricket coach asks the country's best specialist batsman to focus on his bowling skills. We do this in business though.

You should be aware of your weaknesses and might have to find ways to compensate for them but your strengths is what you potentially can be world class in. (I agree with Marcus Buckingham that strengths need to be defined as those things that you are both good at and like doing – not only the things that you are good at.) Also these positive comments or ratings are what will give you the courage to work on your chosen development areas.

Strengths however can also be the cause of the weak spots developing. Someone who is very results oriented and task focussed might overlook the people around him/her and therefore be considered as not dealing with people well. This person could come across as abrupt and not listening well, especially under stressful conditions. The strength caused the weakness. It might not be that the person doesn't like people. They might just be so results oriented that they forget that people might have differing views or opinions.

Consider the following in defining a clear action plan:

- What information might I need to start working on my goal?
- What could my first steps be?
- How will I know this is working and how will I measure it?
- Who can help me? Is there someone I can use as an example or role model?
- What might stop me from achieving this?

- How could I overcome these obstacles?

Working with someone to put his or her development plan together

The information given above is as relevant when you have to help someone else put his or her development plan together. Instead of asking yourself the questions, you can ask them the questions.

In addition, take the following 7 golden rules into account when you discuss the development plan:

- i. Consider the individual
- ii. Consider all options and methods for improving
- iii. Consider current demands and constraints
- iv. Make sure the plan is realistic
- v. Know what the desired outcome looks like
- vi. Determine how you will measure the improvement
- vii. Give feedback regularly

In closing

There is so much research that indicates that people enjoy their work environment more when they have clear goals and objectives that stretch them and when they get regular feedback, yet we do not get it right that often. Mostly because we do not put enough effort into it. The time invested in getting this done properly will get a valuable return in a more effective, productive and happier workforce.

Marti Janse van Rensburg ©