

Knowledge Worker

Feedback Isn't Between You and Me

(June 2017)

The April 2017 cover of *TD Magazine* has a box announcing, “The Blueprint for Turning Around Negative Performance.” Eager to see what this blueprint might look like I quickly turned to the piece in question. It is an understatement to say I was disappointed. The so-called blueprint for turning around negative performance turns out to be a prescription for providing negative feedback. The actual title of the piece is “Use Feedback Scripts to Inspire Behavioral Change.” The premise is that leaders need a script in order to make their negative feedback useful. “Aye,” wrote the bard, “There’s the rub.”

Let’s face it, so-called “negative feedback” isn’t feedback at all; it is criticism. At best, it does no harm; at worst, it alienates and demotivates employees, and I believe the latter happens far more frequently than the former.

What gives rise to these negative feedback sessions? For the most part, they seem to tie to unmet expectations. A manager witnesses an employee doing something and the manager wants the employee to stop doing that or start doing something different. The problem is this: the expectation behind the manager’s judgment was never made clear to the employee in the first place. Worse, the employee becomes aware of this previously unknown expectation when the manager calls the employee in for a sit-down and promptly proceeds to criticize the employee – all under the heading of “providing feedback.”

Feedback isn’t between you and me, it’s between my goals and what I see. In other words, feedback is information about actual conditions or circumstances that can be compared with desired conditions or circumstances. Expectations qualify as desired circumstances – *if* they’re made clear to the person in question and *if* that person accepts them as legitimate and worthwhile. If not, they are no more than the boss’ druthers and not likely to have much impact on behavior or performance. (Yes, Virginia, there is a difference between behavior and performance.)

Moreover, if expectations are clear, if they are applicable, and if they are realistic, there is no need for the boss or anyone else to provide feedback – the employee can tell whether or not he or she is meeting them. Here’s another key point about feedback: in order for feedback to affect a person’s behavior, that person must be able to obtain the necessary information about actual conditions or circumstances without having to be informed about them by someone else. If not, the feedback isn’t really feedback, it’s simply information being relayed from some other source.

So, here’s my call to action: *Let’s all stop trying to disguise criticism as feedback.* It isn’t. Frankly, if we worked as hard to enable true feedback as we do to enable criticism masquerading as feedback, behavior *and* performance would improve.

Further Reading

For further reading on the distinction between true feedback and so-called feedback, see my paper titled “Feedback about Feedback,” which is a lightly edited version of an article that first appeared in *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. It is available on the web at www.nickols.us/feedback.pdf

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About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).