

STEVE JACOBS

UNLOCKING SUCCESS

Measurable improvement

Provide useful feedback that makes a difference in company performance

As leaders, we understand the importance of providing effective feedback to improve performance. Imagine where our golf games would be, for instance, if despite our efforts we couldn't see where the ball landed or no one suggested how to improve our game. But, do we understand what makes feedback more or less effective in the workplace? Are there active ingredients that make a difference?


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The answer is yes. Recent studies in the behavioral sciences can be helpful here.

First, recall conventional wisdom about effective feedback practices:

- Be timely, specific and fact-based.
- Base the feedback on your firsthand observation whenever possible.
- Genuinely care, and show that you do.
- Use a succinct approach that feels natural to both parties. We have found sequencing feedback in terms of "what, so what, now what" usually works well. So, describe 1) What happened/what was observed, 2) Why does this matter and 3) What next steps should be taken.

Combine feedback types

These practices are a good start, but new, notable research takes us further. Behavioral scientist Douglas Johnson at Western Michigan University conducted an analysis of feedback to determine which components, or combinations of components, are the active ingredients that encourage measurable improvement in performance.

He examined the role of objective feedback — strictly fact-based information that compares current vs. past performance levels, such as "Your most recent productivity was X compared to Y in the last period," and evaluative feedback — commentary that conveyed praise or disappointment like "Wow, that was really impressive."

He found that both types lead to performance improvement. More

importantly, the combination of the two together drove significantly higher performance than either alone. Here, one plus one really does equal three.

A little constructive criticism

Other research examines the importance of balancing the ratio of positive and constructive feedback over time. Is it better to focus feedback mostly on what can be improved? On what someone is doing particularly well? A balance between the two?

There is growing evidence that a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to constructive feedback has optimal impact. This serves to establish a sufficient foundation of trust and encouragement that makes constructive feedback easier to receive.

Surprising? Consider this: A study we were involved in found that top quartile companies across a number of industries demonstrated such a ratio (4-to-1 to be specific). By comparison, their conventionally performing (50th percentile) counterparts demonstrated a 1-to-20 ratio of positive to constructive feedback.

Make an effort

But none of this matters if you don't make a conscious effort to routinely provide useful feedback in the first place. Like the story of the man who prays every night to win the lottery but forgets to buy a ticket, nothing changes until your behavior changes.

It's still early in the year. Ask yourself:

- Am I providing meaningful feedback to my direct reports at least twice per month, and preferably weekly?
- Are there opportunities to combine evaluative and objective feedback that I'm not already using?
- Am I close to a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to constructive feedback most weeks?
- Would my people agree with my self-assessment? ●



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