

Manager-Employee Feedback and Development: Why Is it so Hard?

This model offers methods to overcome the barriers to achieving regular, ongoing feedback.

By David W. Bracken ■ November 2017

The current climate surrounding performance appraisals leans toward the abandonment of the administrative exercise we all have come to despise and, instead, replace it with a feedback culture of continuous exchanges between manager and direct report. The solution is not new, so why has it not been implemented in more organizations?

Barriers

There are three barriers to regular, ongoing feedback.

Unclear expectations. One party or both parties in the relationship (manager and direct report) often are uncertain as to what the goal of the conversation is and what their respective roles are given the different types of conversations that can occur.

How to overcome it: Clearly define purpose and expectations of conversations. By creating a taxonomy of types of conversations, most conversations can become clear as to purpose, roles, and desired outcomes.

Fear of failure. The dynamics of the exchange can be awkward and difficult. Giving feedback can be difficult and anxiety-provoking. And the direct report often is fearful of misspeaking given the power relationship (real or perceived) and possibly unprepared for what is to be discussed.

How to overcome it: Train the team as a unit. We all have experienced the failure of training when delivered only to one person in the work setting, usually the supervisor. For this system to succeed, the direct reports also must have a complete understanding of what it is, how it works, and their roles. Doing that as an intact unit would be optimal.

Not supported or rewarded. Asking both parties to have more frequent conversations is unlikely to happen without building skills, rewarding behavior, demonstrating the benefits to them and the organization, and creating accountability.

How to overcome it: Create accountability for all members. There must be a way to track the events, whether manually or in an automated system. Shared expectations and goals need to be assigned to all members of the team. The manager can

be held accountable for behaviors achieving the goals, as well as managing trust, through upward feedback. The organization must communicate its importance, value, and high priority that justifies any perception of additional time.

The ManageCoachLead Model

I propose a model to facilitate the main points in this process (see figure).



The team operates within an organizational context: All of the interactions must be aligned with the organizational context, including goals (what needs to be achieved) and values (how those goals should be achieved). The manager is largely responsible for creating that alignment, though team members can provide feedback as well.

Four types of conversations: check-in, direct, coach, and develop.

Two forms of trust: trusted and trusting.

The four conversations

Check-in. Check-in should happen on a daily basis, if possible. The primary purpose is to ensure that the employee does not have any problems that would interfere with her current assignments. Typical issues can include lack of clarity as to

goals and timelines, lack of support, and insufficient resources (including time or competing priorities). The qualitative nature of these interactions (for example, concern, empathy) also will serve to build trust. There is no agenda, per se, and what results is an efficient exchange of information, including two-way feedback, regarding events since the previous check-in.

Direct. There are some tasks that require clear expectations, methods, and outcomes. These may be repetitive tasks. There are situations where tasks need to be completed under “crisis” circumstances where there is little time for discussion regarding alternative methods, where the manager must direct how the work is to be done and set expectations for meeting the deadline. This conversation will be one-sided, led by the manager who, in turn, seeks acknowledgement and acceptance by the direct report.

This is probably the most common type of conversation in most organizations, but the goal should be to evolve to a point where it is used in only 10-20 percent of conversations.

Coach. The coach conversation is designed to engage the direct report in a mutual problem-solving discussion. This is the most challenging conversation for both parties, often because it is the least taught, used, and encouraged.

Managers usually will default to the direct mode and, frankly, many employees are fine with that. This model strongly encourages the coach mode to create participation from the team members in creating a high-performance environment, both individually and as a team.

In the coach conversation, the topic is predetermined by either party (as much as possible) and the expectation is that the employee will dominate the exchange. In direct mode, the conversation may be 80 percent manager dominated; in coach mode, it may be 80 percent dominated by the direct report. Therefore, the direct report should have expectations that this conversation depends heavily on her input, and the manager has the right to ask, “Why are you not talking?”

While the coach conversation is the most challenging, the organization should set expectations that this type is used most frequently, perhaps in up to 80 percent of the time.

Develop. While every conversation between manager and direct report has the potential to develop the employee in some way, we know that engagement is highly influenced by perceptions of employees that the organization cares about them and will invest in their development, both short term (current and next job) and long term (career). These discussions are so important that they should be in our taxonomy of conversations to ensure that they happen, even if infrequently (for example, quarterly or as needed).

Two types of trust

Trust operates in two directions and is the glue for all relationships.

Trusting. This type of trust is the kind that flows from the manager to the direct report, the type that makes the employee feel that the manager is comfortable in letting him be empowered and take responsibility for his performance. If we measure trusting in an upward feedback questionnaire, sample behavioral items might be:

- My manager listens to and acknowledges the viewpoints of others.
- My manager trusts me to perform my job to the best of my ability.

Trusted. The question here is the reverse—to what extent does the direct report trust her manager? This type of trust is composed of two subfactors: fairness/honesty and competence. In the same upward feedback questionnaire, we could ask employees whether:

- Our manager treats us with consistency and fairness.
- My manager has the skills and abilities to perform her job well.

Why work unit training?

When I worked at a Fortune 100 company that needed to make an urgent change, its implementation strategy was to have all employees attend multiple-day training in teams. It was, first, a major signal of the importance and urgency of this change. It also enabled the work groups to learn the processes for change and then to apply them to their own work. It created a language throughout the organization both within and between groups. As an example, we all became skilled at brainstorming and what the term really meant.

For this proposed process to succeed, it also must be a priority and a language must be introduced. Envision the power of entering into a conversation with your manager knowing that there will be a coaching session on the topic of [fill in the blank] where you know what is expected of you, some simple skills needed to make it work, and the desired outcome. This language (and the skills that go along with it) also can be used across work units, including matrix organizations, project teams, and ad hoc teams.

How to establish accountability

The culture of an organization will determine what accountability means and how it can be applied to various initiatives. Of course, there are pockets of high-performing individuals and teams where accountability means shared responsibility to each other to keep commitments and meet goals in the manner endorsed by the larger organization (that is to say, values). But for the remainder, having a means to track participation helps to create expectations and also aids the organization in the effectiveness of the program.

I know of one organization that passed out cards to employees with the names of types of activities that were

expected to occur. In our process here, cards would describe the four types of conversations. Managers and direct reports would exchange and collect cards for use in some sort of recognition. A more elegant solution would be to automate it, which also would have more control over the collection and use of the chits. The number of each type circulated also would communicate expectations. Again, the culture and history of the organization may suggest other means for creating accountability and measuring success, including ties to performance management.

For decades, organizations have complained about formal appraisal processes and called for more regular, informal interactions that would facilitate alignment, feedback, and recognition. Yet few solutions have been offered. I propose a model that acknowledges the realities and challenges in achieving that goal.

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