

In this Coachcast®, we explore the key importance of feedback in improving our own performance and that of our colleagues.

We look at what feedback is and why we as individuals often find it difficult to receive feedback.

Two key elements of this discussion are the difference between *Impact* and *Intent* and the advantage gained from treating the feedback you receive as information

[This Coachcast® is also available as an audio download]

Receiving and Giving Feedback

Why do we not like receiving feedback?

Our reflex actions kick in when we place our hands on something extremely hot or cold or when someone creeps up behind us. More recently in our evolution we also seem to have developed an adverse reflex reaction when we hear the phrase “I would like to give you some feedback”.

Why is it that when someone tries to support us in improving our performance we see this so negatively, even in cases where the giver of feedback is “in our team” and genuinely acting in our best interests?

The hairs on the back of your neck start to rise and your response is through gritted teeth. “Yes,” you say outwardly but inside you steel yourself for personal criticism, possibly even starting to mentally list things you don’t like about the person providing the feedback. In essence, we operate a defence mechanism to protect us from attack. Perhaps this physiological reaction is some type of Pavlovian response to bad experiences of feedback we have all had in the past.

The danger is that in reacting in this way, we shut out information that may well be useful to us in becoming better at what we do. If someone is thinking something about your approach or performance, you should want to know about it. As Aldous Huxley said, “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”

Many of us know something of the techniques employed in giving feedback, including the commonly used sandwich of the unpalatable filling. We pay little attention to the initial comments whilst bracing ourselves for the inevitable “but” to arrive, followed by criticisms of our approach or performance.

In this Coachcast® we hope to convince you that actively seeking feedback is one of the most powerful and effective techniques you can use to improve your own performance.

We also believe that through modelling effective receiving of feedback from your colleagues and others around you, you will encourage a culture that uses shared observations on one another as a core means of improving team performance. We believe that in order to **give** feedback effectively, you must be able to **receive** feedback effectively as well as demonstrating consistently to your team that you are able to do so.

In terms of the benefits, an organisation that builds a culture of continuous improvement and uses feedback as the means of providing information for such improvement will gain competitive advantage over others. The benefits of such a culture are expanded upon in the Coachcast® on Benefits to the Organisation of Effective Feedback.

Defining Feedback

Before looking at the techniques of giving and receiving feedback effectively, let us think of ways of seeing feedback that remove the barriers we put in the way and stops us taking in useful information.

1. See feedback as information

Firstly, we would like you to view feedback as information. Remove the need to define feedback as either positive or negative. Instead, see feedback as information that has been made available to you to act upon to help you achieve your objective. If you think about it, the worst thing anyone can do in terms of feedback is to give you no information whatsoever!

2. See feedback as another person's perspective at a specific point in time

When someone provides you with feedback, it is them describing to you what they saw or heard from their viewpoint at a particular point in time and the impact of what you said or did had on them or on others in that particular situation. If you are in a meeting with two people, each may offer you a different viewpoint based on their interpretation of what they heard or saw.

If you are familiar with the tools used by surveyors to determine distances, you will know that they use the triangulation method, that is, they take three points of information in order to establish their correct position. In assessing the impact of what we do, we should take all the information available to us and assess for correlations and consistency in what people feed back to us. In processing all available information, we will find elements which will be useful to us in improving our performance.

We are often wary of people offering feedback as we are unsure of their motives. Unfortunately, such a feeling is as likely to arise with colleagues within our own organisations as it is from those outside it. We question motives for giving feedback, sensing, sometimes correctly, that it is being provided as a means of holding power over us or in undermining confidence in us, perhaps in order to gain an advantage in the promotion stakes. Such misuse of feedback does take place in organisations but those in which it flourishes will never become World Class in the development of its people or

in serving its customers. If you currently work within such a culture, do not shun feedback. Instead, seek out and contract with those who understand the true benefit of feedback and work with them in improving your performance to mutual beneficial effect.

3. Be aware of the difference between intent and impact

A useful way of thinking about feedback is to understand and appreciate the critical difference between **intent** and **impact**.

For the most part, when an individual sets out to do their job or to undertake a task, they do so with best intentions. As former Director of Coaching of the British Athletics Federation, Frank Dick OBE says in his powerful and motivational coaching talks, people by and large don't get out of bed in the morning and put on a T shirt that says "Today, I am going to Screw Up!"

On the contrary, we set out to achieve our objectives and take a path that we believe will enable us to do so. Our intent is unquestioned. However, sometimes, for a number of reasons, such as relative lack of experience in a particular role or the undertaking of our role in a new or challenging environment, our intended objective is not achieved. On such occasions, we require those on whom our actions have impacted to tell us what they see as having happened and to work with us in trying a different path to achieving our objective.

One of our coaching facilitators offers a personal example that demonstrates the difference between intent and impact in his coaching programmes:

"When I run a coaching workshop, my **intent** is to further develop the coaching skills of the participants on the event. The **impact** can vary. For example, if there are ten people in the session, there might be ten different degrees of impact. One person might be relatively inexperienced and learn a great deal from the session. A second person may be very experienced in that particular topic area and not get as much from that particular session. The feedback from the former may therefore be very different from the second of the two individuals concerned. Whilst they are both on the programme at the same time, their view as to the impact and effectiveness of a particular training module may be very different due to their different expectations, their experience to date or even to how their journey to the venue was that morning.

Participant One might tell me "I found the session very valuable and interesting as it covered areas I had not encountered before." On the other hand, Participant Two might state: "I didn't take a lot from this session as it did not provide me with any new techniques to those I use already."

Evaluation forms (or "Happy Sheets") are a primary means of ascertaining the relevance of particular training sessions to participants at an event. I do not mind admitting to you that in my early career I was wary of such feedback sheets, tending to read (and reread) what I viewed as the positive comments whilst skipping quickly over the perceived negative responses, usually muttering some comment as to their inaccuracy together with an excuse or justification for my particular approach.

Fortunately, I have now come to see that every comment received, whether perceived as negative or positive, is information. An individual has taken the time and trouble to inform me of their view of what I have said or done from their perspective at a particular point in time.”

Focusing on the difference between intent and impact, the Facilitator’s intent was to increase the skills of the participants on the programme whilst the impact varied dependant on the individual participants’ perceptions and position at that given point in time. By listening to the feedback offered to him, he is able to improve what he does by accommodating the expectations and requirements of similar participants on future programmes. If he does not receive or seek to elicit feedback, he will be unlikely to alter his approach in future as he will see no need to do so.

A helpful way of seeing feedback

As the pilot of a newly landed aircraft taxis towards its designated gate, he takes guidance from the ground crew who guide him in with signals to the left or the right. In taxiing in at a certain angle, the pilot is taking an approach that he believes will attain his objective.

The ground crew have a different perspective and are able to provide information which enables the pilot to adjust his approach until the objective is achieved.

At no point is the pilot told he is right or wrong. He is given precise and timely information as part of a feedback loop in order to fine tune his approach.

Accomplished and expert as the pilot may be, he remains aware of the need and importance of receiving external information to support his task. As he becomes more practiced at bringing his aircraft to a specific stand, he may need less guidance. However, there are other stands, and therefore different approaches required at the same airport. On mastering these, he has other gates at other airports to conquer. He may fly different planes which may steer differently and require different techniques.

The point, as you will now recognise, is that even where we are competent, even expert, in our field, there are a range of environmental and external factors which can affect our ability to achieve our objective. In seeking out external perspectives and viewpoints, we are able to build on our expertise even further, building our skills in a range of different environments. Unlike our pilot, we often believe that once we have mastered a role or task, we remove the need to learn further. We might benefit from considering the words of 17th Century English soldier Oliver Cromwell who once observed, “He who stops being better stops being good”.

Receiving Feedback

We will focus firstly on receiving feedback effectively before discussing how to give feedback effectively since we believe that once we understand and appreciate the most effective way to receive feedback we will be better placed to give it.

We also take the view that by modelling effective behaviour in receiving feedback, we encourage the people we work with to give feedback, creating a culture in which the exchange of honest and well intended information between colleagues within the same organisation becomes the norm.

There are a number of options open to us in how we deal with the feedback we receive.

1. We can selectively use the feedback to reinforce the skills, roles or parts of them we do well and use it as a means of reaffirming our own capability (in other words, we ignore the elements we find uncomfortable or don't like)
2. We examine all the feedback we receive and look at how to improve our overall approach, sifting through the information for elements that might indicate how we might try things differently in similar future situations

Let us examine why it is useful for us to adopt the second approach and how we can go about doing so. Firstly, we need to appreciate that it is in our own interests to widen the range of information we receive and to encourage the people with whom we come into contact to provide such information.

As a rule, we are not particularly good at asking for feedback. When we do, we often do not ask in a way that elicits the most effective response. For example, asking the closed question, "do you have any feedback for me?" is unlikely to generate information that is helpful to us.

Instead, consider asking "What one (or two) things would you suggest I did differently and why?" Framing the question in such a way is far more likely to provide you with information that you can use. Try it the next time you are genuinely looking for an independent viewpoint on your performance.

If we are serious about receiving feedback and are asking the right questions to elicit it, a further hurdle we need to overcome, the one mentioned at the beginning of this Coachcast®, is the adverse feeling we get when someone provides us with feedback that we do not like and which we struggle to accept. To overcome such a hurdle, we need to perceive feedback in a way that is different to how we have done so in the past.

In doing so, we might view the feedback process in the following way:

1. All feedback is information that has been made available to us from a range of different viewpoints by people with different expectations, experience and opinions
2. No matter how accomplished we are at a particular skill or in a particular role, we will continue to improve in such a role if we analyse the information provided to us by different people at different times in different situations
3. By being overly selective in the feedback we receive or in the selection of people from whom we chose to receive it, we will cease to improve or to become flexible in our approach
4. Feedback provides guidance to improving a skill or role that can be at different stages of competence, from beginner to expert. The latter can still benefit from feedback since he or she will not have encountered every possible scenario in which their role or skill can be played out. Until such an unlikely time, we should continue to be open to receiving feedback

Acting upon Feedback

We do not need to act on every piece of feedback we receive. We might understand why an individual participant has reacted in a certain way to the approach of the trainer in a workshop but be aware that there are a number of reasons (for example, logistical or practical) which would reduce the trainer's ability to respond to that individual's requirements.

For example, if a delegate on a workshop provided feedback that they learned best whilst standing on their head naked, we might accept his contention that such an approach may best suit his particular needs or learning style but would be unable to adapt future courses to accommodate individuals of a similar persuasion.

Alternatively, if we receive feedback of similar and consistent views from a number of colleagues who have attended internal meetings we have chaired as to a particular part of our approach or style of running such meetings, we might consider adapting our approach with a view to making future meetings more effective.

Where separate sources of feedback converge on common ground, we might consider how we may be consistently impacting on individuals and how we might be more effective in delivering our message. Remember to reinforce to yourself that your intention remains absolutely correct and that it is your impact that you seek to modify through adaptation of your behaviour or approach in response to the information you receive from those around you. Also bear in mind that what you do will impact on different people in different ways. Your aim should be to understand how to alter your future behaviour

and approach in a way that has the desired impact when you encounter such people or those similar to them again.

Positive versus Negative Feedback

We would like to move away from the idea of feedback as being either negative or positive, although it is appreciated that such terminology is commonly used in many coaching and feedback sessions. To illustrate the benefit of seeing feedback as information, we will describe an exercise that can be used in demonstrating the effectiveness of such an approach (a Coachcast® exercise sheet with further details on how to run the exercise with your team is available as a separate download).

Feedback Exercise

Ask one of your team to sit on a chair with her back to the rest of your team who are asked to remain absolutely quiet until you request their input. Place a receptacle of some type (a waste paper basket will suffice) somewhere behind her and give her a box full of tennis balls (scrunched up newspaper balls are an effective substitute). Ask her, without turning around or seeing where the bin is using a mirror or other surreptitious techniques, to throw the balls over her shoulder into the basket behind her.

Unless your volunteer is extremely lucky, or has eyes in the back of her head, the balls will go everywhere but into the intended target. During her first few throws, you say nothing, demonstrating that total absence of feedback is of no help to an individual in successfully completing a task. In essence, there is no way in which the individual can learn from or build on previous efforts as they are in effect operating within a vacuum.

You then offer encouragement to the person as to how good she is, regardless of where the balls land. The rest of the observing team will note that praising the individual endlessly does not in itself improve performance. This is perhaps a less obvious point than the previous “no feedback” approach. There are many managers who are aware of the potentially damaging effect of what is termed as negative feedback and therefore praise their team members, even where performance is not improving. Again, the lack of linkage between performance and learning is absent.

Change tack and start to berate the unfortunate individual telling her how poor she is at the task, again regardless of where the thrown balls are landing. The point, similar to the one above is that the sentiments do not aid learning as they do not allow the individual to learn from their performance.

The next stage is to ask the team how we can support the thrower in improving her performance of this task. Responses range from allowing her to turn the chair around (which we decline to do) to telling her how to do it. Gradually, a consensus view is formed that the thrower is given information that is:

- Specific
- Accurate

- Timely
- Non judgemental and non personal
- Delivered in a way that is helpful to the volunteer

It is interesting that such components correspond very well with what is generally considered to be the key elements of giving effective feedback in the workplace. It is equally interesting that many of us fail to use such a straightforward approach in the working environment. When quizzed as to why this might be the case, many managers having tried out the exercise put it down to other pressures on them and an admission that they were not aware until use of such a simple demonstrative exercise that they were not as effective as they might be in providing feedback to their team.

In discussions with managers who have tried the exercise just described, it was only rarely suggested that the thrower should be asked how they would like the feedback to be delivered and in what style. This is an important point in that it is recommended to coaches that they contract, i.e., hold a discussion and agree the approach, with their team members as to how they want to be coached. When such a contract is in place, feedback will be more effective since both parties have agreed not only that feedback can be given but also the ways in which such feedback should be undertaken.

In the exercise, we ask the thrower how they like to receive the information. If we are going to be effective in supporting the thrower, we need to communicate using a medium that is best understood by them. If the thrower judges distance more effectively using metric measures, then we should seek to provide information on that basis. If we compare this point to the scenario of a manager who insists on communicating with all members of his team in the same way ("because that's my management style") we can see how the team is unlikely to operate with optimum effectiveness.

This exercise highlights the problem with the way in which we normally give feedback in the work place. The giver of feedback often starts by saying they will start with the positive comments. There is then a natural inclination on the part of the recipient to pay less attention to the positive comments as they know at some point there will come a "but" or a "however" after which they believe they will be criticised.

We challenge this view of feedback and suggest that as a recipient of feedback you see it all as information, available to you in improving your performance. In the exercise, the thrower of the balls is asked how they feel about guidance given to them by their colleagues observing the exercise comments made to them in terms of "4 inches to the left" or "half a metre further back". They do not see such words as having either positive or negative connotations; it is simply information that they can use to hit the target more accurately.

We are not advocating that in giving feedback you ignore poor performance or give praise where it is not justified. In fact we are suggesting quite the contrary. Again thinking about the difference between your objective, which is

to help someone improve their performance, and the method of your delivery, your focus should be on the most effective way of delivering your message. If we know that recipients tend to wait for the “but”, then let us consider redesigning our mode of delivery to increase the chances of the information we provide being accepted.

There are a number of techniques you might consider using in achieving this objective. If the recipient’s brain is tuned to await the “but”, then simply don’t use the word. Try using “and” instead. Let us examine the effect with the following feedback, identical in every way except the substitution of “but” with “and”.

- I thought the way you handled the introduction with the client was effective as I saw very positive body language from her but I thought your close might have benefited from being shorter as I did note her attention wandering slightly at the end
- I thought the way you handled the introduction with the client was effective as I saw very positive body language from her and I thought your close might have benefited from being shorter as I did note her attention wander slightly at the end

The key advantage of the second approach is that the recipient is more likely to continue listening to what you are saying in the second part of your feedback if it is not preceded by a “but”. As soon as the “but” comes, the attention waivers and the recipient, often at a subconscious level, stops listening and can become defensive. They switch their attention to excuses and justifications rather than doing what you need them to do, which is listen.

Anything you can do to keep someone in listening mode will improve the effectiveness of the feedback. It also helps to break down this unhelpful distinction between positive and negative feedback.

Giving Feedback

In a separate Coachcast®, we discussed the importance of self awareness and your impact on your surroundings. The ability to empathise and to see the position from the perspective of another is no more important than when it comes to giving feedback. We suggest that you put yourself in the position of the person receiving your feedback and examine the feelings that you would have if a colleague delivered feedback to you in a range of different styles.

Remember also that your objective is to support someone in improving their performance, not in imposing your own personal or management style – use an approach that works for them. That, in itself, will help you to achieve your own management objectives.

Summary of Key Points of Feedback

- There is a key difference between Intent and Impact. We should start from the basis that an individual's intent is to undertake a role to the best of their ability. The impact of their actions have will vary depending on a number of factors such as the current situation and how well developed they are in a particular competency.
- Our role in providing feedback is to give the individual information they require in order to improve their performance beyond the current point
- In order to give feedback effectively, we as individuals need to understand what it feels like to receive feedback and to understand the key role of feedback in improving our own performance
- Feedback is for the benefit of the receiver, not the giver. As a person who gives feedback, deliver your feedback in a way that best suits the receiver and maximises the opportunity for them to improve their performance
- When giving feedback, make it specific, evidence based and timely
- Contract with others in your team to give each other feedback as a means of improving your performance. Build up an understanding of how other in your team best respond to feedback and treat them as individuals
- No one is so expert in their role that they would not benefit from feedback on their performance. Improve your self awareness and listen to those around you