

## **Communication, Feedback, and Coaching Skills for Managers to Use with Staff Members During the Performance Appraisal Process<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Three crucial skill areas for managers performing effective performance appraisal of staff members are: communication, feedback, and coaching. Effective verbal communication skills needed for managers are: attending, reflecting, exploring, self-disclosure, and acceptance. Feedback is the activity of the manager providing information to staff members in relation to how their performance is meeting clearly identified expectations. Feedback answers the question from a staff member's perspective, "How am I doing?" Effective feedback to staff members, specifically linked to job targets, will improve performance and lead to increased job productivity and satisfaction. Coaching and feedback are highly interrelated concepts, with the distinction being that feedback is information and data that describe performance, while coaching is the assistance given to improve performance when feedback indicates expectations are not met. Effective performance coaching by a manager is key to helping staff members meet their job expectation.*

**Keywords:** performance appraisal, performance management, communication skills, expectation setting, feedback and coaching

### **1.0 Context**

While some corporations are eliminating the annual performance appraisal review, the content presented here is applicable to any approach used for performance appraisal that employs face-to-face conferencing between the manager and staff members (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). Three crucial skill areas for managers performing effective performance appraisal of staff members are: (1) communication, (2) feedback, and (3) coaching (Hillman, Schwandt, & Bartz, 1990). Basic concepts of performance management enhance the changes of these three areas for increasing the likelihood of having a truly meaningful performance appraisal process for staff members. A recent study revealed that 25% of staff members rated their company's performance appraisal process as "not very effective" or "not at all effective" (Talent Development, 2016). Clearly, many staff members recognize the need for improvements in the performance appraisal process. It is essential that staff members have a thorough understanding of the performance appraisal system. Along with print documents, training briefs—either digital or in person—are often used to explain the performance appraisal process. Working in concert with staff members, the manager needs to take the "mystery" out of any ambiguity staff members have concerning truly understanding how they will be appraised. Staff members should be encouraged to ask questions to increase the clarity of specifically understanding how the appraisal process applies to them.

### **2.0 Performance Management**

Performance management advocates that effective performance of a staff member should not be left to chance, with the assumption that given time it will "just happen" and be all right. Performance management stresses isolating behaviors that need improvement and targeting skills for development (Fox, 2016). Managers need to provide a climate that enables staff members with the opportunity to "be their best." This includes establishing a work setting that creates a motivational environment for staff members to perform at their maximum potential. Managers must encourage and cultivate the improved performance of each staff member.

An effective performance appraisal system should have “no surprises” for staff members when the manager formally judges their performance at designated times (summative appraisal). In addition to summative appraisal, staff members need to have formative or ongoing performance feedback from the manager throughout the appraisal cycle. When this feedback indicates that the staff member’s performance has not met expectations, the manager must provide the coaching necessary to help the staff member close the performance gap between what is presently taking place and what needs to happen (Bartz, Thompson, & Rice, 2017).

### **3.0 Communication Skills**

Regardless of the extent to which performance appraisal systems are digitally based, the manager needs to utilize face-to-face communication with staff members throughout the appraisal process. Communication represents an extremely important human element of the staff member’s performance appraisal experience because, if information between the manager and staff member cannot be meaningfully exchanged, the appraisal process is likely to falter. Effective communication is the process of transferring information and understanding from the manager to the staff member and vice-versa. Two-way communication works best in “checking for understanding” to ensure that the manager and staff member have a common interpretation of the key elements being discussed.

Verbal and nonverbal skills play an important role in effective communication and establishing common understanding. Examples of nonverbal communication factors are: (a) body movement such as gestures, (b) how and where the manager sits (e.g., behind the desk, at a table, side-by-side, or in a chair facing the staff member), (c) facial expressions (e.g., smiles or frowns), (d) psychological reactions reflected through blushing or paleness, and (e) eye contact. Effective verbal communication is more than merely words. Pitch and tone, the context in which a statement is made, and the use of silence are examples of variables involved in meaningful verbal communication. Attending, reflecting, exploring, self-disclosing, and acceptance are essential verbal skills needed by managers.

1. **Attending:** The manager expresses interest in what the staff member is saying and feeling by:
  - **Physical attending:** general posture, facing the staff member, maintaining eye contact, sitting in a relaxed rather than a tense position, and having a pleasant facial expression.
  - **Mental attending:** paying close attention to the staff member’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors and relating what is being communicated to what has previously been discussed. (This is “in the moment” mindfulness.)
2. **Reflecting:** The manager reflects a sincere desire to understand the staff member’s situation and feelings by reviewing what the staff member has expressed, clarifying it, and periodically summarizing to make sure that the meaning and intent have been correctly understood by both parties.
3. **Exploring:** The manager continually examines and probes what the staff member is stating to identify specific concerns or problems. If an incomplete explanation or contradictory information is given, the manager asks questions in order to obtain more information and prompt the staff member to provide an “in-depth” explanation.
4. **Self-disclosure:** The manager shares thoughts and information with the staff member related to the topic at hand based on the manager’s background experiences. This provides a supportive and constructive relationship concerning what the staff member has communicated.
5. **Acceptance:** The manager shows appreciation and respect for the staff member as a fellow human being and does not attack the individual’s dignity. The manager should determine when to use each of these five communication skills in order to increase the effectiveness of the communication with a staff member. It may not be necessary for the manager to use all of these skills with a staff member during a particular conference. As an example, self-disclosure might not be used if the manager believes it would be inappropriate to share personal background information with the staff member.

### **4.0 Feedback**

Behavioral science research consistently indicates the crucial role that feedback plays in prompting change in those being appraised. In the context of looking into the future of performance appraisal, Naik (2017) indicates that managers need to provide staff members “as much feedback as possible about how they are doing their job” (p. 2). Feedback is the activity of providing information to staff members concerning how their performance is meeting expectations. Feedback answers the question from a staff member’s perspective, “How am I doing?”

Performance expectations must be clear to the staff member. A recent study by Gallup indicates that only half of the employees polled strongly agree that they understand what is expected of them at work (Talent Development, 2016). Clarification of expectations is often done through reviewing the job description and work products required of the staff member concerning the present work assignment. Staff members individually need specific clarification of expectations sometimes called job targets—as they relate to a particular situation (Naik, 2017). Expectations serve as reference points against which the manager measures performance. Information and data specific to expectations must be collected and analyzed before a manager can give feedback to a staff member. As Ewenstein, Hancock, and Komm (2016) note, “good data that matter” are crucial to state-of-the-art appraisal systems (p. 5). Effective feedback to staff members, especially linked to specific job targets, will improve performance and likely lead to increased job productivity and satisfaction (Murlis, 2017).

It is important to remember that the vast majority of feedback given to staff members by managers is likely to be positive and serve to reinforce their performances. It should also be noted, though, that if negative feedback is delivered appropriately (e.g., respect, concern, specific evidence, two-way communications, and a problem-solving approach), staff members usually welcome it. Additional points to consider regarding managers giving feedback are:

- It should be viewed from the perspective of something that is “received” as opposed to “given.” (The point is that unless feedback is “received” by the staff member, it is unlikely to have an impact on the desired change in performance.)
- Initially, it should be descriptive (“At a recent team meeting you offered no suggestions for increasing sales.”) and not evaluative (“Your behavior at team meetings is ineffective.”)
- It should be given based on a determination of performance in relation to expectations (supports or reinforces performance or indicates a need to improve performance).
- It should challenge and motivate the staff member to invest effort and ownership in the situation.
- It should not be given when the manager or staff member is upset or frustrated.
- It should be specific and exhibit a trusting climate.
- It should focus on behaviors and not personality.
- It should demonstrate interest in the staff member.
- It should be given in relation to an expectation or a related task.
- It should demonstrate effective collection, analysis, and preparation of performance data.
- It should ensure that both the manager and staff member understand what has been discussed.
- It should encourage input from the staff member.
- It should encourage self-evaluation (reflection) by the staff member.
- It should respect the dignity and opinions of the staff member.

When feedback indicates that performance is not meeting what is expected, coaching is required to help the staff member make the changes necessary to meet expectations. This is called performance coaching because it is specific and focuses on the present situation and job.

### **5.0 Coaching**

Coaching and feedback are highly interrelated concepts with the distinction being that feedback is information and data that describes performance, while coaching is the assistance given to improve performance when feedback indicates expectations are not met. Performance coaching is basically problem-solving applied to a performance issue with a staff member. It should focus on determining what will motivate the staff member to be more productive (Hearn, 2016). Developmental or career coaching is more holistic and often deals with skills needed for future experiences of staff members that they may not have yet encountered. In reality, both performance coaching and developmental coaching are often used by managers, especially in an annual (summative) appraisal conference.

The steps of effective coaching are:

#### **1. State purpose**

- Be direct: “I want to talk about your participation in team meetings being more frequent and having ideas or increasing sales.” Do not create mixed messages; be specific and identify the task or behavior to be addressed.

**2. State the performance problem**

- Use pre-planned “observable/measurable” language. Describe the expected performance, the actual performance, and the negative effects of the actual performance.

**3. Get reaction from the staff member**

- Ask the staff member to react. Keep the discussion to the identified task or behavior, and expectation. Ask: “What are your perceptions of my observations?”

**4. Analyze the reasons why performance needs to change**

- Explore the possible causes of the performance problem with the staff member. Ask the staff member to identify what factors over which he/she has control that may be causing the problem. Jointly explore factors external to the staff member’s behavior that could be impeding performance.

**5. Seek a collaborative solution (if possible)**

- Ask the staff member for ideas about how to solve the problem. Be patient and consider all ideas. If the staff member does not have viable ideas, offer your course of action and ask for the staff member’s reaction. Summarize the specific course of action that will be implemented.

**6. Assistance and follow-up**

- Identify the future assistance you will provide and seek the staff member’s input. Identify what each of you will do for follow-up and future review of performance.

Additional points to consider for effective coaching are:

- Check to ensure the staff member has the proper training and developmental activities to be able to make the behavioral change.
- Indicate the positive consequences to the staff member for making the required changes.
- Identify any additional resources needed to aid the staff member in making the needed changes and indicate how you will assist in securing them.
- Check to determine if the staff member knows why the changes are needed.
- Discuss with the staff member her/his responsibility for making the changes.
- Work with the staff member so that buy-in and ownership are likely to exist.
- Establish credibility with the staff member in the context of your expertise (knowledge, skills, and abilities) to recommend changes to address the performance issue.
- Show appreciation for the staff member’s efforts and commitment.
- Respect the integrity and capability of the staff member.
- Foster self-discovery and self-development by the staff member through discussion that emphasizes his/her input.
- Provide follow-up after the coaching session to determine the extent to which the desired change(s) are actually taking place.

**6.0 Critical Summary Points**

The effective use of communication skills by managers is paramount to maximizing the effectiveness of the performance appraisal process of staff members. It is critical that the manager provide feedback to staff members in relationship to clearly identified expectations. When feedback indicates expectations are not met, the manager must use coaching to prompt behavioral changes that will help the staff member make adjustments necessary to meet expectations. Managers should strive to establish an environment in which staff members can maximize their human potential and “be their best” through the performance appraisal process. Finally, the manager needs to remove the “mystery” or ambiguity that staff members have about how they will be appraised and the specific expectations on which they will be judged.

**Footnote**

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