

Analysis of Feedback

It's difficult to play the piano when you cannot hear the notes or if the notes are muffled or delayed. It is much the same with managing people – getting good feedback is important. But most performance feedback systems are less than optimal. Performance improves itself when good feedback is available and the performance itself becomes rewarding. MOST performance feedback systems can easily be improved.

Check if you
do this well

	Specific Standard	Rationale / Explanation
—	1. Information on performance is based on actual measured accomplishment and not on guesses or opinions about how well people do the job.	Some people may appear to be very busy or to do a good job, especially if you are there watching them. Others may work at a slower pace and not appear to work as hard. Personalities differ and opinions about accomplishments may not reflect actual results. Good measures of results need to be implemented.
—	2. Information highlights areas of performance that have quantifiable value to the organization rather than more general areas of personal preference	Be concerned with results that produce bottom-line impacts. Sometimes, we get focused on issues of little or no importance to profits or quality or revenue. While a poor producer may chew gum and come in late, it is better to focus on the productivity than on the gum or lateness. Feedback should focus on more critical issues.
—	3. Performance information routinely goes to the people who do the work, rather than only to management.	People need performance data, not just feedback from management. In the absence of specific information, people will often assume that all is okay. Alternatively, some managers may only say something when results are not good, missing on the opportunity to comment positively. Information on results provides balanced feedback.
—	4. Information shows current levels of performance rather than being delayed by a long period of time; it is timely enough to provide for self-correcting actions	Delayed feedback is not much better than no feedback and is ineffective in changing behavior. It is of little real value to know the results of a month ago since it is unlikely that the behaviors associated with that performance would be remembered.
—	5. Results are reported regularly and not on a haphazard or occasional basis.	Regular feedback helps to set the expectation that performance will be measured and that it is important. Haphazard feedback does the opposite.
—	6. Data is available <i>quickly</i> to the people doing the work -- ideally right after each task is completed but realistically as soon as possible.	Immediate feedback is much more effective than delayed feedback and the best time to measure is right after task completion. Sometimes, this is not cost effective so some delays might be introduced. But is this performance feedback fast (compared to delayed). Next day is not fast!

—	7. Information shows <i>individual</i> performance results rather than only group results	Top performers can sometimes go unrecognized. Paradoxically, so may poor performers. Recognition of individual accomplishment is necessary for correction of poor performance as well as reinforcement of desired or improved levels of accomplishment.
—	8. Results are measured against some kind of performance goal or standard. This could be individual or group oriented or could be related to some level of past performance that might be exceeded.	Having a specific and realistic performance goal provides the personal challenge to meet that goal or the satisfaction of having met or exceeded it. Standards of performance should be obvious and understood. Having historical performance results is often useful.
—	9. Performance is measured by the numbers and not by the more subjective evaluations of "good" or "satisfactory."	It is much more effective when someone knows they need to do "x" rather than simply getting feedback that things are okay. Numbers help to specify the expectations and goals that are desired.
—	10. Performance information is collected and summarized by the performer rather than by somebody else.	Self-collected feedback is seen as more accurate since they did it themselves. It creates active involvement with the performance system. It also insures better understanding of how the measure is calculated.
—	11. The figures and style of information presented is easy to understand and clear as to its source.	Information that is not understood is ineffective. If people either do not understand what the information represents or they question its base, it will be less effective in changing performance.
—	12. Trends in performance (+ and / or -) are made apparent by graphs or charts that show the results over time. Information is shown visibly, either publicly or privately.	Small improvements caused by changes in behavior will "extinguish" if not noticed and reinforced. Since performance improvement generally occurs in small steps rather than big jumps, it is crucial that the system capture this information and that management reinforce the improvement when it occurs. Often, these improvements will be noticed only when compared to trends.
—	13. Data is expressed in a <i>positive</i> way. This means "results achieved" and accomplishments rather than failures, complaints or errors.	Regular negative information (such as error reports) has a tendency to be ignored or debunked and thus become ineffective motivators over time. People tend to learn ways to avoid the negative as opposed to improving the positive.
—	14. Information is summarized to interested levels of management to insure recognition of achievement and continued positive involvement of others.	Without the observable support of top management, few feedback and performance improvement programs are maintained. Top management will not support programs in the absence of reliable and actionable information. Top managers are generally unlikely to continually request and review information that is not positive and current, reflecting issues of performance related to bottom-line impacts.

Notes for discussion and not for inclusion:

This is designed to be a general checklist for performance improvement. As such, it is most certainly not perfect. It is grounded in a variety of behavioral principles and is meant to be a creative discussion tool, not a program for actual enhancement of performance feedback programs. It is 2 pages, so you can print a handout on front and back.

It is my personal experience that most performance-related feedback systems score quite poorly on the 14 points. Generally, the information that people get about their results is delayed, inaccurate or subjective. Getting a 4 or 5 generally translates to mean that performance is okay; it also translates into a reality that a few often simple adjustments in the existing performance feedback system will make the feedback much more effective.

The cautionary note is that reinforcement systems often simply get in the way. If there are big rewards for individual performance, people are motivated to "work the measures." They will do ONLY what the system is rewarding and tend to let other key things slide. In my experience, that is why Deming was so against measurement and appraisal -- he felt that tying the two together was wrong and that it was too demeaning to workers.

Effective feedback is critical to any performance. It is easy to understand if we look at music -- delaying the notes only a few seconds makes learning piano very difficult. It is one of the reasons that learning a pipe organ is so demanding, since there is a delay between the striking of the key and the air resonating in the tube producing the notes. And the other factors of the feedback are quite good (accuracy, etc.).

So, the purpose of this document is to simply get people to consider a variety of aspects of their existing feedback system. A score of 14 is well nigh impossible. But an improvement of +2 will often make a great deal of difference in results!

Use this checklist to generate a discussion. Discomfort can produce change. Change can result in improvement. Improvement may have a bottom line payoff and simply start the whole cycle over again. Some changes you cannot do. But some you can. By using simple tic sheets and self-measurement forms, you can improve feedback and thus performance.

For the **FUN** of It!

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