Your Performance Feedback Doesn't Work—Here's How To Fix It

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The ability to provide effective and credible performance feedback is a critical skill for supervisors, managers and leaders. Feedback delivered effectively helps employees elevate their performance, develop new skills, and achieve success for themselves and their organizations.

But what if the way we typically approach feedback has been wrong? What if managers are focusing on the wrong part of the performance conversation? Does the way we deliver feedback help or hinder an employee's motivation to improve?

A recent research paper, [The Future of Feedback: Motivating Performance Improvement through Future-focused Feedback](#), by Dr. Jackie Gnepp, [President of Humanly Possible](#), Inc., and Dr. Joshua Klayman, [Prof. Emeritus, University of Chicago Booth School of Business](#), concludes that feedback is more effective when managers focus on future performance instead of assessing (or obsessing over) past performance. Their research suggests that employees are more motivated to improve performance when the feedback conversation is collaborative and future focused.

The feedback receiver needs to feel motivated to make changes. Gnepp and Klayman contend that employee motivation to improve performance is greatly enhanced when the feedback conversation is collaborative and focuses on how the employee can improve—and not a causal analysis of past performance. Klayman explains, "A key principle of future-focused feedback is to avoid talking about *why* things went wrong in the past. This runs counter to many people's intuition that you must diagnose why things went wrong in order to figure out how to fix them. Our research says otherwise. While it's important to talk about what went wrong and how it matters; discussing *why* is not only unnecessary, it's most often counterproductive. What matters is the agreement about how to do better in the future."

Klayman and Gnepp argue that while the both the manager and the employee may agree on the under performance or unmet goals, they often disagree on the cause of poor performance. And here is where the problem starts. According to Gnepp, "While supervisor and employee may agree about *what* occurred and which goals were met or unmet, they often disagree as to the causes of unmet goals, even with engaged give and take. Supervisors tend to over-attribute success and failure alike to qualities of the employee such as competence, flexibility, or the willingness to work hard. Employees tend to agree that their successes are due to their skills and efforts, but they are inclined to attribute their failures to things beyond their control such as insufficient time or resources."

It is precisely this causal disagreement that can dramatically decrease an employee's motivation and intention to improve as human beings seek to protect their self-identity. "For the person receiving feedback, their self-protective tendencies are magnified when they get information that questions, contradicts, or challenges their favorable views of themselves. This causes employees to reject the

feedback they receive, question the credibility of their supervisors, and lower their motivation to change," says Gnepp. "In response, supervisors may think the employee is being resistant or unwilling to accept responsibility for poor outcomes."

Motivation to improve is increased when feedback enhances an employee's self-esteem instead of negating it. This can be achieved by focusing on what the employee can do in the future instead of dwelling on the past. "People need to maintain their self-esteem. Since you can't undo a past failure, the best thing you can do for your self-esteem is to come up with feasible ideas for how to be more successful in the future. The prospect of future improvement motivates people to take responsibility, initiate actions, and devote effort to achieving their goals," says Klayman. "In short, future-focused conversations tie change to self-esteem instead of pitting them against one another." Gnepp and Klayman found that while the parties in future-focused feedback discussions might still disagree about the cause of poor performance, "the feedback was still seen as credible, useful, and motivating regardless," says Klayman. "This was true even when the feedback was heavily negative."

Gnepp and Klayman are careful to remind us that future- focused feedback doesn't skirt performance problems—or soften the inevitable blow of realizing that one's performance wasn't up to par—rather, their research discovered that when the employee and manager focus their conversation on how on to move forward, motivation to change increases. "The hopeful discovery was that when the conversation was more future-focused, feedback recipients were more accepting of the feedback and said they were more motivated to make changes," says Klayman.

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