



# Transforming Employee Performance through Effective Feedback

*Discover the 8 most common mistakes  
leaders and managers make when  
giving employee performance feedback  
— and how to avoid them!*

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Published by  
Makarios Consulting, LLC  
2837 Westerham Road  
Downingtown, PA 19335

[www.MakariosConsulting.com](http://www.MakariosConsulting.com)

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## Introduction

Employee performance feedback. It's supposed to be the foundation for performance, initiative, motivation, growth, and success. But for too many leaders, those three words have resulted in anything but positive change. In some cases, it has even seemed to backfire – producing decreased performance, damaged relationships, and lowered morale.

What happened? How could giving feedback to employees about their performance make matters worse?

The diagnosis is relatively simple: the *concept* of employee performance feedback is not at fault. The *problem* is that leaders, managers, and executives are actually sabotaging their efforts by making one or more of these eight common mistakes:

## 1. Feedback that is indirect.

The first mistake leaders often make is giving feedback that is indirect. Consider this familiar scenario:

Fred is well-known throughout the department as an arrogant “Lone Ranger.” His co-workers unpleasantly joke that he would consider collaboration to be a crime, and that he would have to look up the word “teamwork” in the dictionary to find its definition.

Jim is Fred’s boss. He is well aware that Fred’s manner grates on his co-workers, and that his “Lone Ranger” approach is decreasing overall productivity. He calls a general meeting and exhorts the entire staff on the benefits of working together and how they need to collaborate with one another more effectively.

Jim has just given *indirect feedback*. Rather than confronting Fred one-on-one about his unacceptable manner and behavior – which would be *direct feedback* – he has resorted to a “shotgun approach,” hoping that one of the pieces of shrapnel will hit its mark.

Why has Jim taken this course of action? There are several assumptions that, consciously or unconsciously, are driving Jim’s decision:

- **“Indirect feedback is easier.”** Most people do not like confrontation, and direct feedback by its very nature involves personal, one-on-one confrontation. It is much easier to send a company-wide memo or make a blanket statement at a meeting.
- **“Indirect feedback is faster.”** Consider the time commitments of the two approaches. Indirect feedback takes just a few minutes: dictate a memo or deliver a five-minute general address to the staff. Direct feedback requires a face-to-face meeting that may be anything but quick. In fact, direct feedback actually requires personal meeting time on an ongoing basis.
- **“Indirect feedback is gentler.”** Leaders often don’t want to hurt people’s feelings. They assume, “If I address the situation in a general memo, the problem employee will get the point and clean up their act automatically. No one’s feelings will get hurt, and no one will be embarrassed. Besides, what I’m saying is good for everyone to hear, anyway.”

Easier, faster, gentler. Those could be valid reasons to choose indirect feedback over direct feedback except for one thing: indirect feedback is often *ineffective*. What actually happens when a leader delivers indirect feedback? Here are the three most typical results:

- 1. The majority** of people know exactly what's going on – and they resent being publicly reprimanded (however diplomatic the corporate memo or verbal address) for something they didn't do. Furthermore, they will be angry because the manager has not addressed the problem with the individual who is truly at fault.
- 2. A minority** of people will think that they are to blame when they are not. They will assume guilt and become worried when there is actually no need for them to do so.
- 3. The problem employee** will be oblivious to the indirect reprimand and will not change his or her inappropriate behavior.

Increased resentment, anger, confusion, and anxiety coupled with no improvement of the actual problem: that is the most likely result of indirect feedback. The solution? Direct feedback: that is where we will turn our attention next.

## 2. Feedback that lacks specificity.

Direct feedback, at its core, is very simple. It involves the following six components:

1. Meeting with the employee one-on-one
2. Stating the situation clearly in a descriptive statement
3. Explaining the impact of the negative behavior on the department, business, or team

4. Exploring how the situation can be improved
5. Developing an action plan to resolve the situation
6. Agreeing on a follow-up procedure to ensure positive change

The first mistake, giving feedback that is indirect, ignores all six of these components. The second mistake, feedback that lacks specificity, addresses the first component – meeting with the employee one-on-one – but falls down on the second and third: stating the situation clearly in a descriptive statement, and explaining the impact of the negative behavior on the department, business, or team.

Here is an example of how this happens. Suppose that Bob's emails to a vendor are unclear. As a result, the vendor has made mistakes in fulfillment. The manager meets with Bob:

*Manager:* Bob, I'm really concerned because the client is getting on us about these mistakes from our vendor. My VP has gotten calls directly about this and has insisted that we achieve a minimum accuracy rating of 95%. You need to improve your liaison skills to make sure that fulfillment runs smoothly.

*Bob:* What?

Bob is understandably confused! The manager's language is vague and amorphous: Bob's part in this problem is never explicitly detailed, nor is the client's reaction actually defined. Is the client very angry? Merely annoyed? Ready to close the account? Since Bob doesn't know a) exactly what he did wrong, or b) what the possible consequences might be, he is liable to brush off the conversation and continue performing his job exactly as he has always done it.

A more direct (and therefore more effective) statement from the manager would be:

*Manager:* Bob, our vendor has been making mistakes because he hasn't understood the direction you've been giving in your emails. We are in danger of losing one of our major accounts as a result. We need to discuss ways in which we can improve the level of clarity in your instructions.

In this example, the manager is very specific: Bob isn't communicating well in his written instructions. This is causing the vendor to make mistakes, with the result that the client is ready to walk out the door. Now Bob knows not only where the problem lies, but he also has a significant incentive to change.

### 3. Feedback that is judgmental.

Often, leaders attempt to give direct, specific feedback, but then fall into the error of giving feedback that is judgmental. Put simply, **judgmental feedback attacks the person**: and people usually respond negatively and defensively when they are attacked. Instead, it is vital to give feedback that is descriptive. **Descriptive feedback addresses the problem** and gives the person the opportunity to be part of the solution.

Here are four key characteristics of judgmental vs. descriptive feedback: (See chart below)

Judgmental Feedback	Descriptive Feedback
Don't say this ...	Say this instead ...
<p><b>"You"</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You did this. You did not do this.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> The other person will see you pointing the finger at them and may respond defensively.</p>	<p><b>"I"</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> I have noticed that you did this. I have been informed that you did not do this.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> This is a less aggressive opening, and establishes the tone as a conversation.</p>
<p><b>Personality</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You are lazy!</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> Referencing personality traits or characteristics will lead to defensiveness. It is also difficult to discuss personality ("You are irresponsible"), whereas it is easy to pinpoint and discuss behavior ("You did not follow-up last week with the client").</p>	<p><b>Behavior</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You did not get the report done on time.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> If you are correct in your observation about the person's behavior, it will be difficult for the person to deny.</p>
<p><b>General</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You're late a lot of the time.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> This will lead to argument – how much is "a lot"? How late is "late"?</p>	<p><b>Specific</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You have been half an hour late five times in the last three weeks.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> Again, this is difficult to deny if it's true.</p>
<p><b>All/Nothing</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> You are always rude to people.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> Words like "always" and "never" are invitations to an argument since people rarely "always" do something or "never" do something. They may fail to do something 29 times out of 30, but if you say "You never do this" then they will focus on the one time they did it right.</p>	<p><b>Qualifiers</b></p> <p><i>Example:</i> I have observed that once in a while you treat customers with disrespect.</p> <p><i>Reason:</i> Some things, such as the quality of a person's interactions with others, may in fact defy quantitative measurement. In that instance, use phrases that avoid absolutes, so that you can focus the conversation specifically on the problem areas.</p>

## 4. Feedback that doesn't include dialogue.

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Let's assume now that Susan, a manager in a pharmaceutical company, has done several things correctly: she has met with David, a research chemist, one-on-one and has given him direct feedback that is specific and descriptive. Where is she most likely to err next?

The answer? If she does all the talking: a.k.a. the dreaded "Manager's Monologue."

The Manager's Monologue looks like this: Susan calls David into her office, describes the unacceptable behavior, delivers her solution to the problem, and closes the meeting. It takes about 15 minutes. During that time, David is not invited (nor expected) to provide any input.

It is almost guaranteed that if a manager takes this approach, the employee will be in his or her office again before another month has passed. Why? Because *long-term behavior change is rarely gained without engaging in open dialogue*. On a general level, this is true because the employee will resent the fact that they haven't had a chance to explain themselves. They will therefore be less willing to listen to or implement what the manager or supervisor is proposing.

On an individual level, this is true because the manager may not actually know what the core issue really is. Consider Susan and David once again. Susan is concerned because David's projects are lagging behind schedule. She could easily assume that his time management skills are lacking and propose a strict accounting of his time – all the way down to 15-minute increments.

But if she opened a conversation with him, she might find out something entirely different. His productivity might be down because:

- He needs training in a certain area.
- He is being hampered because of unresolved conflicts on his research team.
- He has been asked by the VP to pursue a special project of which Susan was unaware.

- He is having a health crisis that is causing significant fatigue.

These are only a few of the possibilities. There could be many more. The key point is that *each* of these reasons would require a very *different* response. Susan will not know the appropriate resolution to the issue until she understands the nature of the problem thoroughly, and that means engaging in active dialogue and asking probing, open-ended questions.

## 5. Feedback that includes "But - "

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One of the biggest troublemakers in the feedback process is also the smallest word: "*but*." If a manager is giving an employee performance feedback and says, "You're doing this, this, and that very well, *but* ..." then any hope of a positive interaction with the employee is lost. *The employee will forget everything prior to the "but" and will only hear the negative comments*. Not only that, but the employee will leave feeling negative about the entire encounter, rather than inspired to make a positive change.

This may come as a great surprise to many leaders, who have been taught that constructive criticism should start positive, address the negative issue, then finish on a positive note. However, this age-old adage is not the most effective strategy. If a manager builds an employee up only to drop a negative bombshell on them, the employee's emotional reaction will be even more extreme than if the manager simply addressed the problem behavior directly.

Consider it in the light of this analogy: an employee's normal emotional state is level ground. If a manager provides them with feedback that immediately addresses a problem, it is the equivalent of causing the employee to fall into a hole that is 2 feet deep. They will land hard, and it will hurt, but they won't be permanently injured.

However, if the manager first tells the employee how wonderfully they are doing in four different areas, it is the same as helping them climb a 10-foot ladder. The employee feels elated! Then, when the manager brings up the negative issue, they are pushing the employee into that same hole. But now, the total length of the drop – ladder plus hole – is 12 feet. The result? Significantly greater damage.

Here are the important points to remember to avoid the “but bomb.” By addressing the problem directly, leaders:

1. Communicate to employees exactly how serious the issue is.
2. Avoid sending mixed messages that can cause confusion.
3. Preclude appearing manipulative to employees.
4. Remain focused on the issue at hand.
5. Treat employees like responsible adults.

Clearly stating the negative behavior does not mean being harsh. A leader needs to be able to provide performance feedback objectively, clearly, and compassionately, whether that feedback commends or corrects an employee. Corrective feedback may be difficult for the employee to hear, but, like surgery, it is kinder in the long run.

## 6. Feedback that is inconsistent.

One of the biggest culprits that derails effective feedback is simply that managers and executives do not provide feedback on a regular and ongoing basis. Often, they feel that they don't have the time. Or perhaps that it's not important. Or they hope the problem will go away.

Unfortunately, problems never just go away. They build and multiply – and so does the manager's anger and frustration at the situation.

You then get a result like this:

*January:* Sandra is promoted to a new position. However, right from the beginning, she is not performing adequately. Her boss, Richard, is concerned, but he says nothing to Sandra, hoping that she will “come around” as she gets used to the job.

*February:* Richard is still concerned, but says nothing to Sandra.

*March:* Richard is getting frustrated, but says nothing to Sandra.

*April:* Richard is complaining to his peers, but says nothing to Sandra.

*May:* Richard is griping to his boss, but says nothing to Sandra.

*June:* Richard is documenting the issues, but says nothing to Sandra.

*July:* Richard is venting to HR, but says nothing to Sandra.

*August:* Richard is grinding his teeth, but says nothing to Sandra.

*September:* It is time for the company's annual employee reviews. Richard dumps nine months-worth of frustration on Sandra, and warns her that her job is on the line if she doesn't show significant improvement in two weeks. Sandra quits.

The solution to this problem is to give **regular and consistent feedback**. As a general rule of thumb, there should never be any surprises at an employee's annual review.

Managers and executives often assume that routine, daily conversations are sufficient “feedback” for their employees. Nothing could be further from the truth. The comments made to employees while “on the run” typically involve casual conversations or are attempts to put out the latest company “fire.”

In contrast, effective feedback involves:

- **Setting aside a specific time to discuss performance.** Establishing a formal meeting time psychologically reinforces the message that the employee's performance is a top priority – to the leader, to the department, and to the company.
- **Making that time a priority on a weekly basis.** By providing feedback weekly, the leader is able to ultimately *save time* by resolving unacceptable behaviors before they become major problems.
- **Reviewing both positive and negative items.** Consistently providing comprehensive feedback ensures that the employee is steadily encouraged to achieve their best, and is commended for that achievement.

## 7. Feedback that has no plan.

When there has been a consistent problem that needs to be addressed, it is foolish to think that fifteen or thirty minutes of dialogue will resolve the situation. A good plan is essential to ensure positive and lasting change, and the key to developing an effective plan is found in one word: *collaboration*.

Collaboration begins with the leader asking the employee an open-ended question such as, “Where do you think we should go from here to resolve this issue?” There are then several paths the conversation might take:

- **The Ideal.** The best result is that the employee will come up with an appropriate solution. If they do so, they will have a strong sense of ownership of it, and commitment to it. The manager should strongly affirm the employee in this case.
- **The Acceptable.** The employee may volunteer a solution that is not exactly what the leader had in mind, but if it is workable, it is important to *go with their solution*. If the leader starts to say, “Well,

that sounds fine, *but ...*” then the employee will say to himself/herself, “Then why did you ask me in the first place?” They may also feel resentful and defensive, and may not completely own the solution. By accepting the employee's solution whenever possible, the leader keeps the feedback situation on a positive tone and increase the employee's level of ownership to solve the problem.

- **The Unworkable.** There is always the chance that the employee will come up with a solution that simply will not work. At this point, it is imperative that the leader *not criticize* the employee's idea. Communication needs to remain open at this vital junction. Without passing judgment on the solution, the leader should carefully point out their concerns, keep the dialogue going, and see if the employee can come up with a new solution. If they cannot come up with an acceptable alternative, the leader should suggest a plan (that he or she has worked out beforehand) in a non-threatening manner.
- **The Uncertain.** If the employee is truly uncertain about how to proceed, the leader should make suggestions and engage in dialogue with the employee to guide them through the decision-making process in order to mutually decide upon a plan of action.

Once the leader and employee have developed the action plan, they must then agree on a follow-up procedure. It should be clearly specified as to how and when follow-up will occur. It is not enough to simply say, “Well that solution sounds great and the action plan looks terrific. I think we should talk about this some time down the road.” Vague statements like this cause people to think, “Nobody ever follows up around here. I'll never hear anything about this again.” Additionally, if a follow-up procedure is established but then the leader doesn't keep to it, the employee receives tacit approval to continue the inappropriate behavior.

## 8. Feedback that is never positive.

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Too often, employees feel, “the only time I ever hear anything around here is when I do something wrong.” To counter this, it is imperative to give positive feedback on a regular basis: to acknowledge, praise, and affirm behaviors that are beneficial to the company. This does not only apply to situations where the leader is seeking to encourage new, positive behaviors in employees who previously have caused problems. Leaders should also provide regular positive feedback to their top performers, otherwise these key employees will feel taken for granted and will likely begin to slack off or worse, leave the company.

There are three steps to giving effective positive feedback:

- 1. Provide a clear descriptive feedback statement.** It is vital to remember that positive feedback is *not* only smiling and saying, “Great job!” While nice to hear, such a statement is not specific enough. Instead, the manager or executive must start with a descriptive feedback statement that is carefully crafted to accomplish its goal. The leader should let the employee know *very specifically* what behavior was valued so that they can repeat that behavior in the future.
- 2. Indicate the effect or impact of the behavior on the organization.** Leaders should not assume that people know why some action was good or important. It is important to clarify, very specifically, what happened as a result of their positive behavior.
- 3. Give a personal reaction.** It is important for leaders to share their feelings about the positive behavior. Using emotional language helps employees grasp the importance of the behavior and its impact.

## Conclusion

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Feedback is perhaps the single most powerful tool a leader has at his or her command. Ken Blanchard wisely noted, “Feedback is the

breakfast of champions.” By providing feedback that is *consistent, direct, specific, descriptive,* and *proactive*, leaders can bring about astonishing and oftentimes company-wide improvements. Just as a start, effective feedback can:

- > Increase productivity
- > Increase sales
- > Decrease conflict
- > Streamline processes
- > Increase creativity
- > Improve delegation
- > Improve efficiency
- > Uncover training needs
- > Improve the bottom line
- > Improve customer service
- > Develop new skills
- > Improve problem-solving abilities

It takes practice to become skilled in providing effective feedback, but it is a skill that can be learned – and it is well worth both the time and effort.

### Contact Us

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