Using Feedback as a LEADERSHIP PRACTICE
Donald R Groover
Occupational Health & Safety; Jan 2006; 75, 1; ABI/INFORM Global
pg. 64

BEHAVIOR-BASED SAFETY

Using Feedback as a LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Sometimes managers must give positive feedback even for performance that is below standard, if progress is being made toward the targets.

by Donald R. Groover

Providing individual-specific feedback is one of the most inexpensive and powerful tools in the arsenal of a leader. And of all leadership practices, few so perfectly balance a leader’s dual tasks of establishing performance expectations and creating the conditions conducive to meeting those expectations. Done well, performance-based feedback is both directive (it establishes what is expected of the employee) and enabling (it lets the employee know how he or she is doing and gives her information she needs to improve). Still, for many leaders, feedback remains an under-used and poorly understood practice. This article defines both the need for feedback and considerations for putting this tool into practice.

Why We Need Information about Our Performance
Why is feedback so important? After basic physiological requirements for air, food, and water, safety and security are at the base of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. According to this hierarchy, a person cannot begin to work toward higher needs for things such as belonging or esteem until these more basic needs are met.

While often interpreted to mean freedom from bodily harm and from the threats that can lead to bodily harm, safety and security have a more complex meaning in today’s world. An employee who fears losing her job can be just as concerned with safety and security as the employee who is forced to work in hazardous conditions—and just as likely to be preoccupied with self-protective behaviors. Without information about their performance (that is, what is expected of them, where they stand with their boss, and what they need to do to improve), employees can experience increasing anxiety. Unlike
performance anxiety, which can be a helpful driver of achievement in small doses, this type of “unknowing” anxiety can lead to an increasing isolation from the work group and leader, a reduction in behaviors desired by the organization, a heightened dissatisfaction, and turnover, ultimately.

Consider the following example. You start a new job and your boss lays out a training plan that involves very little participation from him. A month goes by, and you have yet to meet with your boss, other than a casual conversation held in a hallway. You are already familiar with this concept. Your coach or instructor gave you advice that you could understand and act on. This person wouldn’t just say “Good job” or “Needs some work.” Neither did he guess about what you needed to work on. Instead he monitored your performance, compared it to a standard, and then told you where you were relative to the standard and how to improve.

Using feedback as a leadership practice follows the same basic principles. As a leader, you need to work with your employees to begin to wonder how your boss perceives your effort and capabilities. Another month passes by, and you still have little interaction with your boss. The boss occasionally says generic things, such as, “I hear you are doing well!” or “How is it going?” But you know it is being said in passing, and he is not seriously interested.

Important beliefs can start developing in this scenario. Let us assume you are a typical employee. We can expect that your level of insecurity is starting to rise. If the insecurity reaches a high enough level, you might start doing things to attract attention, perhaps through inappropriate conduct. As your insecurity mounts, you likely will develop an inward focus, meaning you start acting in ways that make sure your needs are met, in turn worrying less about making others look good or becoming a strong member of the team. Finally, your leader has developed an employee who is highly disconnected from the organization and even the leader himself. This whole scenario could have been avoided with appropriate performance feedback.

Three Steps to Performance-Based Feedback
Skillfully delivered performance-based feedback can reduce anxiety and increase the likelihood an employee will meet and exceed performance targets. If you have ever played sports or a musical instrument, probably you first establish a standard of performance, clarify how you will gather information, and finally give the employee specific, actionable information about that performance.

Establishing the standard. Feedback is information on performance compared to a specific standard. These standards typically are some overarching targets, with a specific set of behaviors or practices that will lead to successful accomplishment of the targets. The feedback process starts with a clear understanding of what set of standards an employee is expected to achieve.

As leaders, we need to reduce insecurity and anxiety. We start the process by making certain the direct report has a complete understanding of what we expect him to accomplish and the timeframe he has to accomplish them.

Gathering information. The second step to reducing anxiety and improving performance is establishing with the employee how you are going to monitor performance. Performance monitoring can happen in a number of different ways. The approach depends on the nature of the work and the level of trust that exists between the leader and report. Rather than relying on just one set of data, it is important to make sure the performance information is verifiable and that the employee understands how and why you are going to collect information. Therefore, you need to determine at least two monitoring methodologies.

If you are a front-line supervisor, monitoring most often involves assessing the quantity and quality of the work—information that is often readily available. Supervisors often know on a daily basis whether the employee completed the job assignments, made the required number of units, and did this to the level of quality desired. However, depending on the type of culture and organization you are trying to build, quantity data may not be enough. If an organization is focused on safe production versus just production, then when an employee completes a job in record time, you will want to verify the safety procedures were not compromised to achieve this result. It means asking a few more questions or maybe even checking on
the job—but when the feedback is provided, it will not be recognizing undesired behaviors inadvertently.

Higher in the organization, collecting information on performance might require surveying peers and others the direct report is interacting with and affecting through her work or some level of direct observation. In a high-trust relationship, you may rely most heavily on self-reporting by your direct report. This is acceptable, but it is important you also have some independent data to supplement your employee’s assessment of performance.

Providing feedback. Having established what is expected from the employee (the standards of performance) and the monitoring method, we get to provide the performance feedback itself. One decision you have to make is how often and for what level of performance to provide positive feedback. Many leaders believe feedback should be provided only whenever there is “exceptional” performance. On the surface this might sound like a reasonable approach, however, what is exceptional performance? Would we know it if we saw it? While we could certainly get information on exceptional results, are those the only things we should give feedback on? What about the practices and behaviors that delivered those results?

Again, using the principle that only exceptional performance demands feedback, most managers themselves suggest that exceptional performance is unlikely to occur more than once a month, if that. This is not much feedback, and it ignores all the other average yet desirable behaviors and practices that have occurred throughout this time.

The fundamental starting point of giving feedback for only exceptional performance is ill-conceived. The purpose of giving feedback is to give the employee information about how he is performing relative to a set of standards. Positive feedback for desired practices, behaviors, and results will increase the frequency of the behaviors. It will cause the employee to want to exceed the basic standards because he “gets it” that his performance matters. Second and equally important, feedback is the way for a manager to stay connected to her employees and give them a sense of belonging and security.

There are even times when managers need to give positive feedback for performance that is below standard. When an employee is not hitting the needed performance targets and has been given feedback that makes it clear he is underperforming, if we truly want to keep the employee, we need to provide positive feedback for progress being made toward the targets.

Conclusion
Feedback is an inexpensive yet powerful tool. Good leaders provide a flow of feedback that is based on how well the employee is performing. The absence of giving feedback can be perceived by a direct report as disrespectful. No matter how challenging the situation you or your company is in, a flow of information needs to occur between the boss and the subordinate. When the times are the most challenging, we need to increase, not decrease, the number of personal contacts we make with our employees.

Don Groover, CIH, CSP, is vice president and executive relationship manager of BST, Inc., an international performance solutions company that is based in Ojai, Calif. He is an experienced consultant and executive coach who has worked with hundreds of companies in various industries. For information, visit www.bstsolutions.com.