

Do You Give Good Performance Feedback? Your Cardio Machine Does!



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I was in the gym recently, working out on a piece of cardio equipment and lost in thought when a sign on the control panel flashed, “**Climb faster!**”

The machine was telling me very specifically what behavior it wanted to see from me, without any judgment, name calling, personal opinion or assumption about why I was not moving at a particular speed. It just wanted me to climb faster.

I thought “That’s good feedback!” A bit more detail – such as the specific speed I was expected to attain, would have made it excellent feedback.

You vs. Cardio Machine

In my mind I was contrasting this programmed, mechanical feedback to some of the examples of feedback we have heard from our clients, which they have received - or given.

In their simplest form, the examples they shared were vague complaints, formed in a statement, such as: “Your presentation was not robust enough” or, “You need to be more upbeat” or one that a manager recently heard from her boss, “You need to be a better coach.”

At least with the machine I know what, “climb faster” means. I’m not sure what a more “*robust presentation*” is, or what being “*more upbeat*” means, or being a “*better coach*.”

Surely each statement could be more useful if it had been followed up with more specific explanation, such as “let me tell you what that looks like/what I mean...”

Giving performance feedback is an excellent opportunity to reinforce solid performers and redirect the underperforming ones. But that is not always the case.

Same Ole, Same Ole!

My thoughts went to how to structure feedback when I was on the machine because I recently had a conversation with a manager who is preparing for end of the quarter performance feedback conversations. Her company has decided to move from doing annual performance reviews for everyone, to spacing them out, and conducting performance feedback conversations without discussing compensation, at the end of different quarters.

However, she said other than giving performance feedback on a different schedule, not much else has changed. It's pretty much the same drill: She brings each of her direct reports into a vacant conference room, hands them an official-looking document and then has the same old conversation.

She tries to say something positive about what the employee is good at, then some unpleasant things about what they are not so good at. And after some defensive and self-protective comments from the employee, the employee is supposed to improve on the “not so good at” stuff AND feel motivated. But more often than not, even her best employees leave feeling disappointed.

Discussing areas an employee needs improvement in is often called “constructive criticism” unfortunately most managers - and employees! - focus on the criticism rather than how constructive it may be. And not surprising, the feedback is typically about something the employee **did not do**. That is, the feedback is a complaint or criticism about some performance that was missing in the past – as if any amount of talking could change it.

A conversation about past performance can have a useful function if the employee is asking for specific examples or is in denial.

Learning from the Machine

Performance feedback discussions are opportunities for a manager to outline what is expected of an employee on a go-forward basis. Many managers have forgotten that **the primary purpose of conversations about performance is to improve performance!**

In a performance appraisal discussion, many managers go through a list of examples of past performance that did not measure up – the “not so good at” stuff - as if listening to a litany of complaints ever helped anyone change their performance for the better!

To avoid going through a list of “wrongs” many managers “water down” their comments, in the mistaken hope that the poor performance will correct itself. Or they give “drive-by” feedback – “*Good job!*” – that is not targeted to specific behavior and is of little value to the employee.

Like the cardio machine, the most value and possibility of behavior change will come out of a statement of what you expect from the employee that they are not displaying. And the best place to discover expectations is in the source of the complaint!

Don't Complain – Say What You Expect, Like the Machine

If the cardio machine could think, the control panel may have flashed the complaint, “You’re climbing too slowly!” Instead it flashed the expectation of climbing faster. The program indicated what was expected of me, without criticism or judgment.

The technique of reframing can help you “think” like the machine.

Reframing has been used for some time in the field of psychology, especially in the study and teachings of positive thinking. In its simplest form, reframing is a technique for turning a negative or harmful thought into a positive statement.

We’ve used it as a tool to help managers articulate the complaints they have been thinking about the employee, and turn them into forward-focused statements about expectations. That is, the thoughts the manager has been having – their complaints – actually point to the desired performance expected.

A simple example is when you are thinking that an employee “The employee does not follow through with customer requests.” The reframe is “*I expect you to make a plan and follow through with requests from customers.*” With the follow up: “*Let’s talk about what that would look like with a recent request....*”

Or, when you have an employee who interrupts people before they finish what they are saying, you can discuss ways for them to *listen silently*.

Conclusion - Stop Complaining Start Expecting!

If the intent of a performance appraisal discussion is to have the employee change their behavior, then it seems to make sense for the manager to tell the employee what is expected.

One of the morals of this story is that many performance feedback comments are really complaints about something that is missing or something that was not done in the way the manager **expected** it to be done.

Having a conversation with an employee about the past certainly gives us information about what the person has done, and some say it is the only proof we have about what they may be capable of. I disagree. The past is not a 100% accurate predictor of the future - if it were, we would all still be in diapers, crawling around eating dirt.

Using the pragmatic technique of asking for what you want - reframing - and making statements about expectations versus listing complaints, typically results in **two noteworthy results**:

1. Managers who are more likely to initiate a performance discussion because the wording and overall approach makes it more comfortable to deliver the feedback and have a productive conversation for possibility of specific behavior, in the future
2. The employee learns what performance is expected, as opposed to focusing on what went wrong.

As a manager, being clear and specific about your expectations, helps ensure that you and the employee can create a foundation for a future that is different than the past – which is surely a worthwhile result to aim for.

Are you frustrated with the lack of impact performance feedback actually has on performance? Are you tired of the old, ineffective techniques for giving feedback – that produce more discord than engagement? We have solutions that can help you to **Stop Complaining and Start Expecting** – just like the machine! Contact us at PPlotczyk@GrowthStrategyPartners.com or call me at 781-343-4005.

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