

Managing

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The Power of Informal Feedback

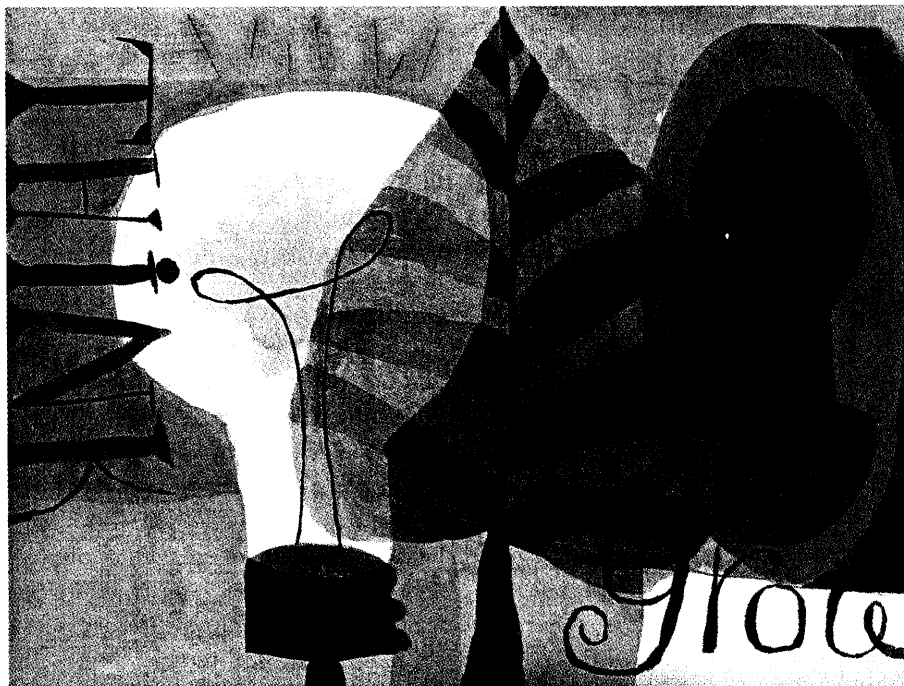
For various reasons, we often don't give meaningful feedback. Perhaps we don't want to give "bad" news or say something critical to someone else. We might shy away from dealing with the other person's potentially negative reaction. We might think that the person doesn't need feedback, especially when something has been done well. Or perhaps we feel that we don't have the time to devise a way to deliver an effective message. But whatever our reason for failing to give prompt feedback, it will be far outweighed by later costs in time, money or frustration.

Three Scenarios: What's Missing?

Picture these scenarios.

1. An associate completed a memorandum for you a week ago. The individual found the information you needed to pass on to the client and demonstrated good analytical thinking—but the writing style was atrocious. The associate stops by your office to ask how you liked the memo, and you answer, "Fine, fine." You know, however, that you will be reticent to give this individual another writing assignment.

2. You asked your secretary to arrange an important in-office lunch meeting for you with a new client that you want to impress. On the day of the meeting, everything was absolutely perfect. Your secretary not only reserved the best conference room but



also catered a delicious lunch, creating just the right atmosphere. Later, your secretary asks how the meeting went, and you say, "Fine, fine."

3. Your daughter recently got her driver's license. You know that she is a poor driver, but you don't have the heart to tell her that she shouldn't be driving by herself yet. When she asks for comments on her driving, you reply, "Fine, fine." You have, in fact, told parents of her friends, "It's okay if your child rides to school with my daughter, but she's really not a good driver. Please don't tell her I said so, though. I don't want to hurt her feelings."

Each of these scenarios illustrates a missed opportunity to give valuable informal feedback in a timely way.

Criteria for Meaningful Feedback

Informal feedback is a powerful tool for enhancing relationships, assisting individuals in professional development, teaching those you supervise how to be more effective and, when something goes particularly well, giving recognition and showing appreciation. It should never be seen as negative or useless. Delivered effectively, informal feedback is an essential ingredient in managing our relationships with others.

There are several criteria that transform feedback from meaningless to invaluable.

■ The feedback is given soon after the action involved, so there is a quick connection between the particular

action and your response to it. Many times, for instance, an associate learns of poor performance only at the annual review, months after the actual assignment is completed. Giving feedback far removed from a particular situation is meaningless. Not only are the specifics already forgotten, but also the individual has no chance of correcting something that happened months ago.

■ The feedback states the specific action to which you are responding. This one may sound obvious, but make sure that you and the other individual are really on the same page.

■ The feedback is detailed enough to be meaningful. This may involve both negative and positive comments. In the associate scenario, for example, the individual found the information that was important and demonstrated good legal analysis. These behaviors should be complimented and, thereby, reinforced. But, of course, the associate also needs a detailed explanation of what was wrong with the completed assignment. Showing the associate examples of where and how the writing was poor is important.

■ The feedback explains actions that you want the individual to take in the future to improve the situation. Here, taking the time to show the associate how to correct his or her writing style allows that person the opportunity to develop professionally.

Revised Scenarios: Incorporating Feedback

Now, let's return to our three scenarios, adding in meaningful feedback.

1. The associate demonstrates a talent in legal analysis, even though the writing style needs improvement. This associate is worth developing. By providing immediate feedback, you can help this person become a more effective

communicator and develop into an excellent lawyer. In the long run, this will ease your workload and allow you to be more efficient. Refraining from giving the associate written assignments and waiting until formal evaluation time to make comments does a disservice to both of you.

2. Your secretary has gone beyond expectations to make you look good. Promptly demonstrating your appreciation is vital in maintaining your secretary's motivation and willingness to do more than is expected. Tossing out an indirect "fine, fine" can do more harm than good. That kind of feedback makes an individual feel unappreciated, lowers morale, affects work product and may, eventually, cause a person to seek new employment.

3. Your daughter's poor driving presents a serious, potentially dangerous situation. She needs honest feedback to understand how to develop into a safe, confident driver. Although it is wonderful to praise our children's accomplishments, refusing to give them critical feedback does them a disservice—especially when theirs and others' safety is at stake. Providing immediate input while sitting beside your child as he or she learns to drive is essential to ensuring that he or she will be a safe driver.

You're Never Too Busy for the Payoff

All of us want and need feedback. Informal feedback is an important tool for bonding relationships, teaching people how to work with you effectively, promoting your expectations, reinforcing wanted actions, and pointing out developmental needs and ways to improve them. In our busy lives, it sometimes seems that we don't have the time to give effective feedback. But the few minutes needed to plan and deliver it will pay off in numerous tangible and intangible ways. ■

Action Plan

Put meaning in your responses to others' actions by following these steps to giving effective feedback.

- Plan ahead regarding the specific comments you want to deliver and your goals for the feedback.
- When delivering the feedback, be as specific as possible about the assignment, action or behavior to which you're referring.
- If you're offering critical feedback, begin and end with a positive about the person's performance.
- Give specific examples of the action or behavior that you want changed.
- Provide illustrations of the specific changes to be made.
- Discuss specific action steps that will help the person make the needed changes.
- Learn more about the process from these helpful resources:

Giving and Receiving Feedback: Building Constructive Communication by Patti Hathaway. Crisp Publications, 1998.

The Feedback Toolkit: 16 Tools for Better Communication in the Workplace by Rick Maurer. Productivity Press, 1994.

Lifescrpts for Family and Friends: What to Say in 101 of Life's Most Troubling and Uncomfortable Situations by Erik Kolbell. Pocket Books, 2001.



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