10 Tips for Giving and Receiving Feedback Effectively

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Last month we talked about "on-the-spot" coaching and the importance of connecting with employees in real-time to give them feedback. This month I want to get more specific about how to give—and receive—effective feedback.

Multiple studies have shown, and I'm sure your own personal experiences will attest to, the relationship between effective feedback and employee engagement. Receiving regular, pertinent and specific feedback from their direct supervisors and managers is a key driver of engagement. On the flip side, when that feedback is absent, it creates a great deal of distress for employees because they don't know where they stand or how they're doing. One of the greatest gifts that leaders can give to their direct reports is clear, consistent and honest feedback. Here's how:

1. Ask yourself: "What useful information do my people need? What information would help them be more successful in their jobs?" Your goal for giving feedback is to encourage future positive behaviors and also to let your staff know how they're doing and the impact they have on others or on the organization.

2. Avoid focusing on feedback as either positive or negative. Feedback is feedback—get rid of those descriptors because they can actually interfere with your ability to get your point across. Your feedback is just as important in giving recognition as it is in correcting behavior.

3. Assume positive intent. Approach your staff from the standpoint that you recognize their desire to perform effectively in their jobs. Whatever it is that they have done, consider your response from the standpoint that their intent was positive. So, you might start out by saying: "Chris, I know that you're committed to providing exceptional customer service." Or, "Pat, I know that efficiency is very important to you."

4. Address specific, observable behaviors instead of making broad judgments. Consider the difference between: "Chris, I just observed you walk past a patient who clearly looked lost," and "Chris, you're insensitive to patients' needs."

5. Act immediately. Feedback should be provided as soon as possible after the behavior was observed. The closer to the actual situation, the more pertinent and relevant your feedback will be.

6. Attain confirmation that your message was received. As part of your discussion with your employee you should make sure that they heard, and understood, the message you sent. So you might say something like: "Just so I know we're on the same page, could you tell me what you understand our next steps to be?"

In addition to giving feedback, there are also times when we will receive feedback. Here are some guidelines for when you're on the other end of the conversation:

1. Suspend any defensive responses that you might naturally feel. Frankly, most of us had had negative experiences with receiving feedback so our initial reaction may be a "fight or flight" response. Work to keep your emotions in check!

2. Say to yourself: "This is information." Remember, we are not going to label feedback as either positive or negative. It is simply feedback—useful information that can provide you with new insights or understandings about how you or your behaviors are perceived by others. You are always in control of your own response so you get to choose whether you are going to respond emotionally, defensively, or whether you will focus on the feedback as useful, character-building information.

3. Seek specifics. Using a non-defensive tone and body language, seek additional information, particularly if the person giving you feedback hasn't provided you with specific details. "I'm sure you know that providing exceptional customer service is very important to me, so I want to make sure I understand more about how I came across in this situation. Could you give me a specific example about what you observed?"

4. State your understanding of the conversation. Just as you want to seek confirmation of your message when you're the sender, when you're the receiver you want to confirm that you understood the message. "What I hear you saying is…Is that correct?" A gracious recipient of feedback will also thank the person giving the feedback, understanding that it is a growth opportunity.

Of course there will be some give and take in your conversations with others, whether you are on the giving or receiving end of the feedback. A technique that can be helpful to ensure that the conversation doesn't escalate or become defensive is empathetic assertion. Empathetic assertion involves making a statement (assertion) that expresses your understanding (empathy) for the other person's point of view.

Let's take a look at a few examples:

- A nursing staff member whose attendance at an administrative meeting is requested resists and says she just doesn't have the time to attend. "I know that it's hard for you to leave your patient care responsibilities, yet I want you to know how important your participation in this meeting is."

- You spot a housekeeping employee who stops in the hallway to comfort an obviously upset visitor. "I couldn't help but observe your interaction with that visitor just now and wanted to let you know how impressed I am with your compassion. Thank you for taking the time to express concern and offer assistance to that family. That was a shining example of our mission in action."

- You observe two IT employees on an elevator with patients complaining about their workloads and the "unreasonable requests" they're receiving from internal customers. Pull them aside once off the elevator and out of patient earshot and say: "I know that your break team is a time for you to connect with co-workers and sometimes to vent, yet the elevator is public space and we all need to make sure we're aware of our patients and visitors and that we don't say or do anything that will reflect poorly on the organization. When you complain about your workload, you give the impression that this isn't a good place to work."

One important point about these examples— there are no "buts." Especially when inserted after a compliment or positive remark, the word "but" negates the entire first part and may actually increase defensiveness when giving feedback. Replacing "but" with "yet," can help to soften the impact of what you're saying. So remember to keep your big but out of the discussion.

Feedback is important and, as both research and personal experience suggests, a vital contributor to employee engagement. Whether you're on the giving or receiving end, the tips above can help ensure that your feedback serves to engage, rather than alienate, your team members.

In addition to employee engagement, creating a culture where feedback is openly given and received can also impact patient safety. An article in _HealthLeaders Media_ recently shared the results of a survey indicating that far too many nurses are afraid to speak up and share feedback based on a recent survey by AORN–_The Silent Treatment._