

Want to Give Better Feedback at Work? Stop Talking About Goals

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Feedback at work.

Reading those words, did you cringe, or feel a desire to click away to cute puppy videos? If so, you're not alone. Most of us are working in a feedback desert— we're not getting enough, and when we do, it's not in the way we'd prefer.

Knowing how to give feedback effectively is just as puzzling. Research consistently shows that for managers, delivering feedback— especially when it's critical— can feel like a foreboding journey into the unknown.

And yet, the easeful flow of positive, strengths-based feedback is crucial for a healthy workplace. Studies show that high-performing teams receive about six positive comments for every negative one.

Given the importance of positive feedback in shaping our ability to do our best work, and the general apprehension managers feel towards providing it— something needs to change. Let's examine what we're doing wrong, why, and how to use my Feedback Compass to stop the cycle of spirit-breaking conversations at work.

When goals are overrated

It's understandable that we place feedback in the goal domain— we're a goal driven society. Naturally, so are our companies.

But while goals are essential for aligning individual efforts with organizational strategy, a goal-forward approach to feedback discussions over-emphasizes results and underappreciates the process of getting them. And the process— with all of its bumps and forks in the road— is where people need the most guidance.

Furthermore, the goal-centric approach can feel pedantic to the receiver, forcing them into binary yes/no responses that devalue their perspective. This approach puts us at risk of disconnecting from the person before us, and missing the point of feedback entirely: to motivate people to do their best work.

What to focus on instead of goals

The science of people and organizations shows us that people are motivated when they feel connected, valued, and heard. Naturally, for people to do their best work, feedback sessions should address those needs.

Where to start?

Instead of diving in goals-first, focus your feedback on three key areas that *motivate* goal attainment:

1. Learning and development
2. Value and belonging
3. Systems change

From these domains, goals get rooted in the rich foundation of motivation, and emerge thoughtfully and organically in service of the individual and the organization.

Keep the feedback discussion short but consistent

A 15-30 minute meeting may not seem like enough time for a meaningful conversation, but if held weekly, the conversation grows in tandem with your workflow and the organization's needs. Brief as the sessions may be, they become part of a true, evolving dialogue. What was once cringe-worthy becomes free-flowing, valuable, and maybe even enjoyable.

The Feedback Compass

To note: it's unrealistic to cover all of these topics in one weekly session. Rather, managers and employees can collaboratively choose which topics are most important and timely.

The Feedback Compass

Learning & Development

Center the conversation on what the team member is learning and how it can inform future actions. Explore needs for growth, asking open-ended questions to uncover how employees feel they can best advance.

Example discussion questions:

- What have you learned over the past week that guides, shifts or challenges what you are planning for next week?
- From whom do you need input, or do you need more time to process or think?
- What kind of skill development will set you up for success?

Value & Belonging

When a team member understands how their work contributes to the big picture, engagement and performance soar. Emphasize the importance of each employee's role and how it contributes to the organization's overall success.

Example discussion questions:

- How do you see your role impacting our team's and company's success?
- What achievements in your recent work do you think had the most positive impact?
- Would you like to share learnings or a case study with our team?

Systems Change

A company's structures and systems can place a barrier between team members and their best work. Allow space for sharing perspectives on how company structures may impact performance and suggest improvements.

Example discussion questions:

- Have you encountered any organizational processes or systems that have hindered your ability to perform your best work?
- How can we influence positive and sustainable change here?

In conclusion

So many of us associate feedback with dread, fear, and apprehension. But by using the Feedback Compass to elicit consistent, meaningful communication, and to recognize the fundamental human needs for connection, value, and being heard, we can transform feedback from a daunting task into a positive, empowering experience.

This is not feedback for feedback's sake, or for the touchy-feely, "good vibes only" variety of workplace mantras. Rather, this effective strategy benefits individuals *and* propels the organization forward. When done right, feedback is a powerful tool for holistic growth and development.

If you'd like to learn more about how to foster a workplace that soars, please check us out at opendooradvisorsinc.com