

Improve your Coaching Effectiveness

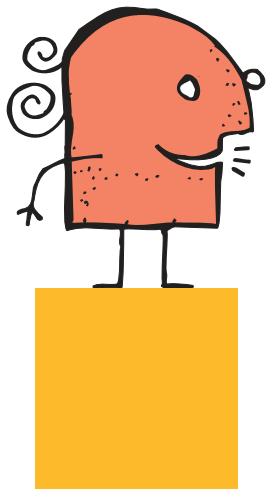
Masterful Feedback

by Phil Mittertreiner

Does your feedback produce the intended result?

Feedback for performance coaching purposes can be defined as:

noun [féed bàk]:
Performance information communicated to individuals or groups. This information is intended to support development and enable performance to be maintained or improved. We call this information feedback.



As a leader and coach you are aware of the need to provide feedback. But despite this awareness, many leaders admit to not providing feedback often enough or, after the fact, realize the feedback they did provide did not produce the intended result.

Mastering performance feedback requires an understanding of the three critical distinctions within feedback – assessment, advice and observation. It also requires knowing how feedback differs from recognition. Knowing when best to use each can make the difference between success and failure in your performance coaching efforts. This article clarifies these distinctions and addresses misunderstood terms used within the domain of performance coaching.

Distinguish

Your role as a leader or coach in the feedback process is to ensure individuals (or groups) receive valuable *performance improvement* information. Being aware of the distinction between assessment, advice and observation becomes helpful for this process.

To illustrate these distinctions imagine a situation where a colleague has asked you to provide them with feedback on his or her presentation to the senior management team.

Your comments might include the full range of performance feedback:

Assessment

Feedback through assessment involves a grade, score or judgment on the performance relative to a set of expectations or a performance standard.

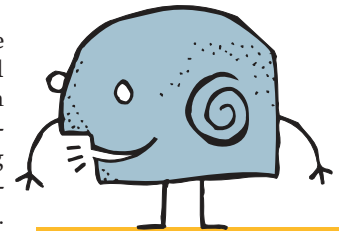
- ▲ “That was a very good presentation.”
- ▲ “I’d score that presentation an eight out of ten.”
- ▲ “The presentation met the expectations of participants.”

Advice

Advice is a suggestion or recommendation offered as a guide to action or conduct.

- ▲ “Continue with the practice of connecting with participants before any presentation”.
- ▲ “Keep your hands out of your pockets when presenting. Practice standing with your hands relaxed at your side or with your finger tips pressed together.”
- ▲ “Try to notice the filler words that you are using. Practice pausing in your presentation.”
- ▲ “Do more presentations to take advantage of your natural talent in this area.”

Advice can be direct: “You should do this ...” or indirect: “Let me tell you how I handled a situation like this one before,” or “When I was in your shoes, I ...”



Observation

Observation is where the coach is replaying for the individual what happened through the eyes of a detached observer. This is similar to replaying the highlights of a sporting match on television.

- ▲ “I noticed you connected with everyone in the room prior to the presentation and addressed them all by name.”
- ▲ “During the entire question and answer period you were jingling the change in your pocket .”
- ▲ “You said ‘basically’ fifteen times in the first ten minutes of the presentation, and ‘you know’ ten times.”
- ▲ “You responded to each of the four questions asked from the group by clarifying the question, responding to it and then checking back with them to ensure you had answered it.”

Observations are data points which can be verified. If you had a video recording of the performance these would be the highlights that showed up on the news summary.

Providing feedback with both observation and impact increases its value.

Observation with Impact

Including a statement of impact can often be an even more powerful way to share observations.

For example:

- ▲ *"I noticed you were jingling the change in your pocket. This distracted me from listening to your story."*
- ▲ *"You referenced that three other departments were in support of your recommendation. This gives me confidence your new approach will be successful."*
- ▲ *"You changed the tone and pitch of your voice frequently while presenting. This kept me engaged and interested in what you were saying."*

- ▲ *"You addressed each member of the audience by name and connected with them prior to your presentation. This gave me the impression you were well connected in the organization."*

Impact, when used in this way, is an add-on to observation. The behaviour as well as the impact are noticed and mentioned. When the impact statement is restricted to you reporting on your internal state (I was distracted, confident, engaged, interested, etc.) it is still technically an observation. However, when the impact statement includes an opinion or

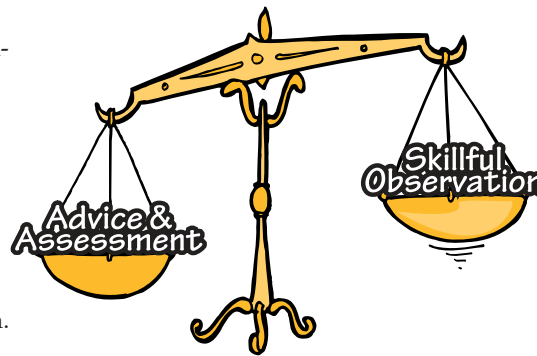
impression, it becomes more like an assessment. This is not bad; however, it's important to know you've gone beyond providing a statement of factual observation.

In both cases, providing performance feedback that provides both the observation and impact can increase the value of the performance observation by ensuring the individual understands the impact.

Balancing the feedback

To provide higher quality feedback consider the following:

- ▲ In general, most performance feedback conversations within organizations focus on assessment and advice. Leaders tend to overuse assessment and advice and underuse observation.
- ▲ Assessment and advice contain considerable risk. Have you ever received an assessment on your performance that you did not agree with? Have you ever received unsolicited advice? While both assessment and advice can be very helpful, when not skillfully used they can frequently become impediments to performance improvement.
- ▲ For high-performing individuals, saying *good job* frequently sounds hollow and provides them with little information on how to improve their performance.



- ▲ Providing an individual with skillful observations on his or her performance provides specific, tangible evidence of both strengths and improvement areas.

These considerations are not intended to imply that assessment and advice should not be used by coaches. Indeed some of the most powerful coaching moments can be the result of skillful assessment and advice. It is worth noting however, that observation is underused and carries less risk.

Skillful Observation

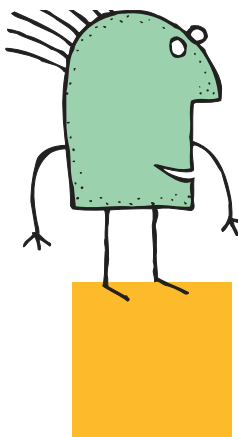
Skillful use of observation involves noticing things that are reflective of current performance and/or future potential: Focus on the wrong things, and performance may stay the same or could deteriorate; focus on too many things, and the individual becomes overwhelmed. Skillful coaches notice actions and words that the casual observer does not notice. They then select from these observations the things that can have the most significant impact on improving performance.

Reinforcing and Corrective Feedback

Traditionally, there have been two types of feedback – positive feedback and negative (or constructive) feedback. This distinction is not that helpful. More valuable is to distinguish between reinforcing feedback and corrective feedback.

- ▲ **Reinforcing feedback**
– feedback intended to ensure the performance and/or behaviours continue in the current direction.
- ▲ **Corrective feedback**
– feedback intended to direct performance and/or behaviours down a new path.

As it turns out, the ratio between a coach using reinforcing feedback vs. corrective feedback is rather important. For example, if you only provide reinforcing feedback you may be missing an improvement opportunity. If you only provide corrective feedback the relationship can deteriorate. Research on marriage relationships predicts a breakdown if the ratio of reinforcing to corrective feedback is less than 5:1. Coaching relationships are likely not that much different. Maintaining a 5:1 ratio of reinforcing to corrective feedback over time can support a strong relationship and ensure coaching effectiveness.



The reinforcing vs. corrective feedback ratio is important.

A Critical View of Criticism

Criticism is corrective feedback with a sharp edge. The edge is a result of the intention behind it – to cut a person down or attribute blame. It rarely is helpful and frequently impedes performance improvement.

Criticism has been known to motivate some people to higher levels of performance. A type of “I’ll show them” attitude takes over. This extrinsic motivation however has its risks and is rarely associated with sustained performance improvement. Ideally the motivation is inspired by the joy of learning and the satisfaction that comes from performing at a higher level, not to avoid future criticism or prove someone wrong. Skilful coaches earn the right to deliver tough feedback by building a relationship based on trust and mutual respect. It becomes clear to the receiver that the sole intention of the feedback is to support their learning and performance improvement. In this context the coach and performer can discuss very difficult observations, assessments or advice with the end result being a positive long-term impact.

Recognition – Reward, Praise and Appreciation

A related topic to feedback is recognition. From a coaching context, recognition is about noticing and acknowledging performance or contribution. It can come in three forms: reward, praise and appreciation.

Reward is something given in return for a contribution. In an organizational setting this could be a day off with pay, a gift or a financial bonus. The focus of reward is on the thing given. In contrast, with praise and appreciation the focus is more on the words said.

Praise is commending someone for his or her performance – expressing approval and admiration.

- ▲ “You have exceptional depth of knowledge in this area.”
- ▲ “The final report you created was simply fantastic.”

Appreciation is about expressing gratitude and thanks.

- ▲ “I appreciate the extra effort you went through to deliver this presentation on such short notice.”
- ▲ “I would like to thank you for all your assistance on this project. I’m grateful to have you as a trusted colleague.”

The impact of a reward can be amplified when combined with praise and/or appreciation.

Recognition is frequently confused with reinforcing feedback. The easiest way to distinguish between feedback and recognition is to uncover the intention. With feedback the primary intention is to support performance improvement. With recognition the primary intention is to recognize exceptional performance.

Leaders tend to have well-ingrained patterns behind their delivery of what they currently know to be *positive feedback*. When this involves delivering praise, showing appreciation or giving a reward it actually is not *positive feedback*, it is providing recognition. In its place,

if the intention is to support performance improvement, the coach could share specific performance observations, provide a positive performance assessment or offer reinforcing advice.

It is important for leaders to recognize these actions, loosely categorized by the layperson as feedback, are distinctly different tools in the performance toolkit. Each has its place and time. Each provides value in different ways. Choosing the right one or right combination is the hallmark of a masterful coach.

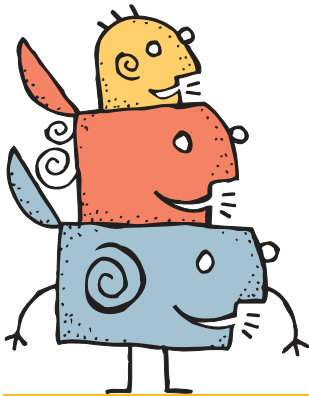


Improve feedback effectiveness

Putting it into Action

As a leader and a coach, you can improve your feedback effectiveness by putting these distinctions into action:

Use skillful questions and listening as a first step.



1. Be aware and mindful of the use of assessment, advice and observation.
2. Practice skillful observation.
3. Use the technique of *observation with impact* by adding an impact statement where appropriate.
4. Target for a 5:1 ratio balance between reinforcing and corrective feedback over time.
5. Avoid criticism.
6. Provide meaningful recognition to individuals – offering appreciation, praise and rewards where appropriate.

In addition to this, if you are really committed to improving your coaching effectiveness, use skillful questions and listening as a first step to *pull out* from the people you lead their observations on their own performance, their assessments and advice to themselves.

- ▲ “What observations do you have about your performance?”
- ▲ “How would you assess your performance?”
- ▲ “What went well? What do you want to repeat next time?”
- ▲ “What changes would you like to make?”

Individuals are more likely to act on observations, assessments and advice provided by themselves. This approach:

- ▲ Enhances self-awareness,
- ▲ Improves commitment,
- ▲ Increases retention, and therefore,
- ▲ Increases the probability of successful change.

Feedback can be a powerful instrument of change. Awareness of the options available and skillful use of these options will improve performance and satisfaction for both the coach and individual.

Author's Contact Information

For additional copies of this article or for more information on how to integrate the *Masterful Feedback* process into your organization please contact the author:

Phil Mittertreiner
 Potentials Unlimited Inc.
 (403) 830-4442
 philm@potentials-unlimited.com
 www.potentials-unlimited.com

Author's Note

I thank John Phillips, colleague and friend for both ideas and inspiration that contributed to this article.



Potentials Unlimited
 INCORPORATED