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Managerial Feedback, Associate Performance, and Eleven Positive Feedback Rules[1]

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Introduction

It has been well documented that associate (employee) performance is directly and positively related to supervisory and managerial performance. In fact, managers and supervisors often have more impact on associate job performance than they realize. This suggests that if the work group is not performing up to par (i.e., has the ability to significantly improve performance), the responsibility likely belongs to the management team. Therefore, an important key to improving associate job performance involves improvement in managerial-supervisory human resource management skills and practices.

More specifically, an important managerial performance area that greatly impacts associate job performance levels involves managerial *feedback*. Given this situation it is important that *all* managers and supervisors recognize the following:

- The three basic and alternative types of feedback that managers can provide to their associates.
- Precisely what each type of feedback communicates.
- The associate performance responses that are most likely to result from each type of feedback.

Feedback Alternatives and Associate Performance

The managerial feedback alternatives are *negative*, *none*, and *positive*. An examination of each alternative indicates what each communicates and what worker performance changes are most likely to occur when managers use each type of feedback.

Negative Feedback

Negative feedback obviously communicates manager dissatisfaction with associate performance. The performance change that is most likely to occur may not be as obvious. What managers and supervisors tell the authors is that (assuming the worker wants to retain his job) performance will likely improve. However, this improvement will likely be only to the minimum satisfactory level and furthermore, it will quite likely be temporary. That is, after a short time the worker often reverts to the previous unsatisfactory performance level that encouraged the negative feedback. This results in the manager having to again step in with more negative

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feedback. It is also suggested that the reprimanded associate may look for opportunities to "get even" with the management and the organization.

No Feedback

Providing no feedback may possibly be the worst course of feedback action for managers. Yet, most workers indicate that their managers have a tendency to ignore their good performance. It may be related to the managerial attitude that "I should not have to praise them for what I hire and pay them to do." Without feedback, associates make assumptions about their job performance, and these assumptions may not be consistent with the managerial performance perceptions. Some potential worker interpretations of no feedback may include *my performance is okay*; *my performance must not be important, or the manager would say something*; and *the manager does not care about my performance*. No feedback, therefore, does communicate something to associates. The problem is that a manager cannot be certain how his associates perceive the lack of communication. Furthermore, it seems likely that performance will remain the same, or decrease, if there is no feedback from the manager.

Positive Feedback

Positive feedback obviously communicates managerial satisfaction. Under this circumstance the worst result will generally be no change in performance. It is anticipated that positive recognition for good performance will result in performance improvement to a higher productivity level. This often occurs because research (Spitzer, 1995) indicates the following:

- In a nationwide survey of 2000 workers by the Gallop Organization, 69% indicated that receiving praise and recognition from their bosses was more motivating than money.

- Four out of five workers said recognition or praise motivates them to do a better job.

- Many managers have a tendency to ignore the good and satisfactory performance of their workers.

- Most (75-80%) workers say they can be significantly more productive.

Positive Feedback Rules

It has been suggested that given the three managerial feedback alternatives, positive feedback is the only one that will consistently result in the type of performance that managers and organizations want. It is the only type of feedback that will generate and maintain performance *above* the minimum acceptable level. Furthermore, based upon worker feedback it is generally recognized that most managers and supervisors do not provide enough positive feedback. There is a managerial tendency to ignore significant amounts of good worker performance. Managers, who are committed to both increasing their levels of positive feedback and not ignoring good performance, have a need to understand the basic positive feedback rules. Eleven of these rules can be identified:

1. *Earned:* Positive feedback must be earned by the associate. Providing positive feedback for unsatisfactory performance will destroy managerial credibility.

2. *Immediate:* Positive feedback should be provided immediately after or during the good performance. The longer the time period between the performance and the recognition, the less effective the feedback will be.

3. *Personal:* Be personal when providing positive feedback. That is, use the personal pronoun “I” rather than the more impersonal expressions of "we," "the company," etc., which will help positive feedback be perceived as sincere (Rule 11).

4. *Improvement:* Managers should not wait for perfection to provide positive feedback. In fact, any time a manager sees improvement, the improvement should be recognized. Otherwise, without feedback the improvement may disappear. Please note it is the improvement that is being recognized, not the overall performance level, which may not yet be up to standard.

5. *Individualized:* Individual one-on-one positive feedback is more powerful than group or team feedback. This does not mean that managers should not recognize the group for team accomplishments. It only suggests that individual positive feedback should be included in the feedback process.

6. *Often:* Some research (Latting, 1992) has suggested that to create an optimal work environment, managers should be providing a positive to negative feedback ratio of 4 to 1 (4:1). What is your feedback ratio? Most managers fall considerably below this ratio and furthermore, much of the positive feedback they do provide is not heard by their associates (Rule 8). The secret to achieving this 4-to-1 positive-to-negative feedback ratio is provided by Rule 7.

7. *Task Specific:* Make positive feedback very task specific. That is, avoid the "good-job" syndrome because it is too general, lacks specificity, and can more easily be interpreted as lacking in sincerity. By recognizing specific tasks that are being performed satisfactorily, managers have the opportunity to achieve the 4-to-1 positive-to-negative feedback ratio. Furthermore, when the term "good job" is used in the recognition process, associates are more likely to assume that all of their job activities are being performed with excellence.

8. *Pure:* When providing positive feedback, keep it pure. Do not mix positive with negative feedback via the "but" or "however" words. For example, "You did a good job today, but. . . ." Associates only hear what comes after the "but". They do not remember the first part of the feedback statement. By mixing the positive with some negative, managers do not receive credit for the positive portion, as it tends to fall on deaf ears.

9. *Vary Timing:* Do not allocate a specific time or day (e.g., Friday afternoon) to provide positive feedback. To do so is a violation of Rule 2 and is likely to be associated with the lack of managerial sincerity (Rule 11).

10. *Vary Style:* Most positive feedback is provided verbally. Look for alternative ways to deliver the "good" news. Examples include letters, memos, telephone, fax, email, etc.

11. *Sincere:* Associates have a knack for recognizing when their manager is just going through the motions, when he is not being sincere. Therefore, for managers to be able to harvest the rewards of providing positive feedback, it is important that they are genuine, and truly believe in the process.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between managerial feedback and associate performance. It has identified the three alternative types of feedback, what each type communicates, and the most likely worker performance levels associated with each type. The conclusion is that positive feedback is the only one that will consistently generate the type of worker performance that managers and organizations want. The eleven rules of providing positive feedback were then discussed. Via the application of these rules, managers can create a work environment whereby associates will be motivated to perform at higher levels of productivity.

References

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