A hand is shown pulling a blue rope through a gap in a blue corrugated metal surface. The rope is taut and extends diagonally across the lower right portion of the image. The background consists of horizontal blue lines, suggesting a window blind or a similar structure.

# THE FEAR OF FEEDBACK



Understand why your employees get anxious about feedback and learn how to overcome your fear of delivering it.

BY PATRICK S. MALONE AND ZINA B. SUTCH

**W**hat is the most feared word in business? *Feedback*. The most feared five words? *Can I get some feedback?* The most feared six words? *I have some feedback for you.*

Get the idea? Whether you are the giver or receiver, feedback strikes fear into the heart of even the most seasoned manager.

Giving and receiving feedback draws on our emotions, fears, and the perceptions we have about ourselves, especially the doubts we may harbor regarding how good we really are. It rocks us to the core, because deep down we carry around and conceal doubts about ourselves. The thought that someone else can see our flaws—and these flaws are no longer hidden—makes us feel exposed and vulnerable. We want the people we work with, and those we work for, to see the best of us, not the worst.

Consider what this looks like in real time: Employees go about their daily work, seemingly secure in their performance, and then they get the email indicating their annual performance review is scheduled for Friday. Workers often immediately feel the emotions bubble up inside: fear, apprehension, worry. They begin thinking of the things they could have done better, the times they may have missed a deadline or overlooked an opportunity. They begin assessing their performance and accomplishments against their co-workers. The feelings and anxiety are real, and dealing with these feelings may take up employees' time, zap their energy, and reduce their productivity. For supervisors, the anxiety is equally as real.

## Who wants feedback?

With all this tension tied to feedback, the logical question arises: Do people even want it?

The short answer is yes. But it comes with conditions.

No doubt about it, workers consider feedback beneficial for their career development. Seventy-two percent of workers surveyed by Zenger Folkman in 2014 felt their performance would improve with constructive feedback. One surprising fact is that more than half of surveyed employees opt for corrective feedback over praise. Further, according to Officevibe research, 82 percent of employees want feedback, whether it's positive or negative, and 65 percent of employees prefer more feedback than less. The research also reveals that 58 percent of managers maintain they provide plenty of feedback.

From a generational perspective, all ages want feedback. Zenger Folkman found that Baby Boomers were more comfortable giving positive feedback and receiving negative feedback than Millennials or Gen Xers. Millennials appeared to struggle with giving positive feedback but were open to receiving both positive and negative advice.

The bottom line is employees do want feedback—for themselves and their organizations. It allows for learning organizations to grow and thrive. Environments with healthy feedback mechanisms are more innovative and productive and are simply better places to work. Employees, knowing where they stand and how their work fits into the organization's mission, are better able to stay aligned with organizational goals and values. Finally, managers who feel free to provide feedback are able to make better decisions and build meaningful relationships with employees and stakeholders.

## There's a catch

Sure, people want feedback, but that doesn't mean they are always ready to hear it. And for us supervisors to have an impact with our delivery, we must first understand a few critical aspects of our target population. Several factors feed the fear of receiving negative assessments, and many are nurtured deep in a person's psyche and are perspectives individuals carry with them from early childhood.

**Thinking patterns.** Early in life, people establish horizontal thinking patterns that nurture their natural tendency to stay within the scope of thought in which they find the most security. In practice, this equates to relying on pre-established perceptual filters and ways of doing things that give individuals a sense of comfort about the world around them. When a person can consistently validate his current way of thinking, he is far less open to changing his behaviors based on feedback.

**Work versus the person.** As supervisors, it is easy to assume that we're evaluating a direct report's work. In other words, we see feedback as assessing performance, data, and helping professionals to refine their work practices. But recipients can view this quite differently. In truth, when we assess performance, we are, in a way, evaluating the person—at least that's how it feels to those whom we evaluate.

**Survival instinct.** When a person is criticized, the brain will go into overdrive to attempt to protect that individual from anything that doesn't square with what she believes to be true. Think of it as a biological survival process. When people receive negative feedback, it strikes at the very base of Maslow's hierarchy and can trigger a fear of exclusion from peers, thus threatening the recipient's fundamental need for survival and safety.

**Negativity bias.** Humans process bad stuff much more readily than good stuff. Once again, this is related to the biological survival instinct where the brain reacts quickly based on negative stimuli. Because people are hardwired to react to these signals faster, they tend to focus on, and remember, negative experiences more readily. This means they are more likely to recall criticism than accolades.

Supervisors are not off the hook here when it comes to any of the aforementioned factors. The same psychological barriers that staff face also impede our ability as supervisors to provide feedback. And while it's tough for most of us to admit, the fact remains that many of us struggle with giving constructive reviews. Even the most confident among us may crumble under the specter of delivering an annual performance appraisal or answering the simple question "How am I doing, boss?" Most of us don't want to embarrass our employees, make them feel badly, or call out their shortcomings.

Some of the more common reasons tie to our ingrained biases.

**Central tendency bias.** This bias, one of the more common, reflects the inclination for supervisors to rate most of their team as average. The danger here is that employees who perform at the top of the scale are not likely to be rewarded for their exceptional work, while those on the lower end of the performance spectrum are not held accountable. The result is a manager who avoids extreme ratings and scores everyone as average, as well as employees with low morale.

**Contrast effects.** This psychological bias emerges when our evaluations are affected by comparisons with other people or events we've recently encountered. Say, for example, you meet with a stellar performer for an annual appraisal and then follow that session with a meeting with an average team

## SEVERAL FACTORS FEED THE FEAR OF RECEIVING NEGATIVE ASSESSMENTS, AND MANY ARE NURTURED DEEP IN A PERSON'S PSYCHE.

member. If the evaluation of the latter is lower than what would appear to be fair, you may have fallen into the contrast effect trap.

**Confirmation bias.** Consider a situation where an employee has performed below average for some time but has recently made positive strides in his work. If you discount, or ignore, the more recent positive performance, you may have exhibited confirmation bias. This is reflected in your subconscious tendency to depend on information that reaffirms your past perceptions and discounts any new data that may contradict past assessments.

**Overconfidence bias.** Supervisors know a lot of information. But sometimes that can hamper their assessment of the performance of someone with a similar knowledge base. This is especially applicable in technical fields where supervisors oversee the day-to-day work of subject matter experts. Managers may appraise employee performance yet are subconsciously validating their own knowledge in the field. The result is often a less-than-stellar assessment of a valued team member.

### Supervisor, meet thyself

In a fascinating series of experiments, Carla Jefferies of the University of Southern Queensland contends that the issue with feedback is not so much with the recipients but with the supervisors themselves. She asked survey participants to provide feedback in three formats: face-to-face, anonymously, or to an independent third party. Her findings suggest that participants with lower self-esteem were more likely to give positive feedback face-to-face. They were equally as likely to provide more critical assessments anonymously or through a third party.

When coupled with the naturally occurring biases noted above, this suggests that the supervisor's role in feedback is even greater than previously understood. Think about this from the manager's perspective: You are often encouraged to remain

emotionally distant from your teams—drawing an imaginary line between supervisor and getting too familiar. You are warned not to be too empathetic for fear of dampening performance expectations. This manufactured distance between manager and employee does little to build the trust necessary for engaged discussion.

Indeed, emotions on both sides of the feedback cycle create challenges for supervisors. You must attend to the emotional needs of the person you're evaluating while simultaneously embracing your own emotions all in real time. Due to a common lack of emotional intelligence skills, many leaders find themselves lost in attempting to deal with this complex interplay of feelings, fear, and anger. They will often resort to the more prescribed, and more comfortable, approach of structure and formality, thus widening the emotional canyon between both parties and reducing the opportunity for the employee's growth and useful performance improvement.

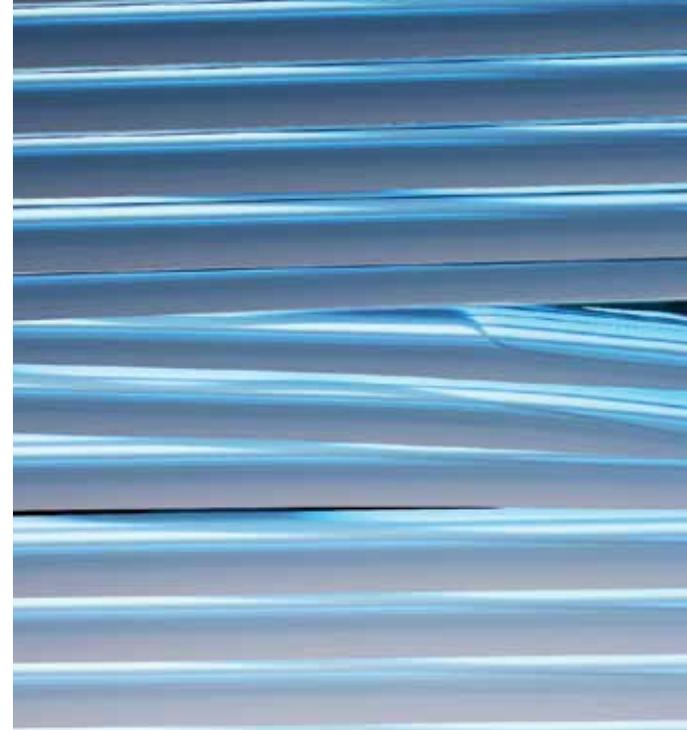
### **A formula for feedback success**

Feedback can be quite a charged endeavor. Both sides generally enter with some measure of trepidation. But by following a few simple guidelines, supervisors can conquer their fear of feedback and turn an otherwise difficult encounter into a positive one, fostering improved performance and individual employee development.

**Choose the right setting.** Pay attention to space and time. Where and when you give feedback matters to the recipient. Is it given in a private place where others can't hear you? Is it reasonably cut off from possible interruptions? Have you given yourself and the recipient enough time to respond, clarify, and discuss the feedback? In the right place with enough time increases the chances that the employee will accept feedback.

**Make it timely.** Giving feedback when the incident is still fresh in both of your minds increases the possibility that you'll each remember the details of the incident and make the relevant connections. Of course, if the incident leaves anyone emotional, it is best to give people time to decompress and calm down before diving into feedback. Formal performance feedback should occur at regular intervals; however, informal feedback—given often and regularly—reduces the surprise element that often derails the recipient, and it also makes giving and receiving feedback the norm.

**Frame it properly.** Do a self-check and make sure that the feedback you are about to give comes from a true, inner desire to help and improve the recipient's performance. Negative feedback can feel like



a personal attack, generally because the person giving the feedback also often carries fear and anxiety into the feedback session, which can come off as sounding judgmental. While you are justifying the negative feedback, the recipient may feel attacked and become defensive. When feedback comes from the heart and you take time to frame it properly, your employee likely will be less defensive and open to learning.

**Connect emotionally.** Connect with your own emotions and prepare notes that can keep you on target, focusing on the specific issues and performance. Be a little vulnerable and connect with the recipient to get a better idea of how she may receive the message. Be mindful about what you say and how you will say it. The word choices you make can be emotionally driven, so taking a little time here will increase your connection to the recipient. And remember, negative language automatically sets in motion a negative reaction.

**Listen.** The act of really listening takes not only patience but practice. Practice active listening while giving and receiving feedback. When receiving feedback, listen for what you can learn from the feedback. And when giving feedback, listen for what you can learn about the receiver's perspective and experience. The dialogue will go a long way to increase the likelihood that the employee will be able to understand and use the feedback for improvement.

**Have a plan.** By focusing on the actual observed actions or behaviors and on the next steps for improvement, you separate the person from the issue. Clearly state what you observed the person do, be precise and to the point, and avoid using statements that may seem like an exaggeration such as "always" and "never." Avoid using phrases that are hard to



define, such as “not pro-active enough” or “unprofessional.” Be clear about the specific impact and your expectations moving forward.

**Balance the negative and positive.** Try to give as much, and preferably more, positive feedback than negative feedback. If an employee receives negative feedback more frequently than positive feedback, she is apt to become and stay defensive. In this state, the employee is less apt to improve performance or behaviors. Positive feedback increases the chances for change and improvement.

**Make it a learning experience.** When employees perceive the culture of their organization as one that is supportive, where colleagues strive to do better and where everyone—including the supervisor—is open to feedback, you have a learning experience. When employees view feedback as an opportunity for growth and improvement and not a personal attack, and if supervisors model this, it sends a powerful message.

Companies should provide employees with formal training on feedback, including self-monitoring and active-listening components. This helps employees learn the nuances of giving and receiving feedback and fosters a learning environment that is open, innovative, and safe.

### A plea for feedback

Quick personal story: The authors of this article live most of their time on a boat in a marina. At a recent social event, we had the opportunity to meet the marina’s owner. Within 15 seconds of the initial handshake, the owner asked, “So, how are we doing? What else can we provide for you? How’s your experience living here? What can we do better?” It was a classic example of a desire for feedback at its finest, and his mindset has infused his entire team.

## EMOTIONS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FEEDBACK CYCLE CREATE CHALLENGES FOR SUPERVISORS.

No wonder his marina is known as the best on the Chesapeake Bay. The lessons learned in that short conversation were indeed valuable.

Providing effective feedback is never an easy task. The barriers, both psychologically and institutionally, are significant. But the organizational benefits are without question. Companies that build cultures that allow for learning, trust, emotional intelligence, and continuous improvement are known for nurturing feedback at all levels. This includes between and among supervisors and employees, contractors, customers, and stakeholders. In such environments, employees perform better, are more innovative, make better decisions, are more engaged, and are less likely to leave. The end result? Better mission accomplishment. You can’t get better than that.

**Patrick S. Malone** is the director of Key Executive Leadership Programs in the Department of Public Administration and Policy, School of Public Affairs, at American University in Washington, D.C.; [pmalone@american.edu](mailto:pmalone@american.edu).

**Zina B. Sutch** is in the Senior Executive Service for the federal government in Washington, D.C.; [zinasutch@gmail.com](mailto:zinasutch@gmail.com).



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