



# Secrets to Giving Staff Feedback: The Threefold Path and the Feedback Success Formula

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# Introduction

The *Secrets to Giving Staff Feedback* white paper is for executives, managers, and other leaders who want to use the power of positive communication skills to become more influential and effective both inside and outside the workplace.

The framework introduced in this paper has been used effectively by clients of Ovson Communications for two decades. Leaders who utilize this framework develop effective feedback skills, achieve more of their intended results, and get colleagues and subordinates to hear their messages clearly and respond positively to their feedback.

This white paper will give readers an understanding of the following key concepts:

- The three types of feedback and how each is perceived
- The likely outcomes from each type of feedback, defined in this white paper as the “Threefold Path”
- The Feedback Success Formula and how to use it effectively

# **The Need for Feedback in Today's Workplace**

There is a stunning dichotomy in the workplace. While life seems to move at a faster pace every day, work tasks—even in the age of computers—take longer than managers think they should.

A study cited by communication consultant Kelly Watkins reveals that workers spend 30% of their time in the workplace talking and 45% of their time listening. Strategies to improve these activities which take up three-quarters of daily office life will allow both employees and managers to gain time, increase productivity, and reduce frustration.

## **Change Is Here**

The work environment is changing. Attitudes regarding work-family balance are shifting, careers are changed every few years, the line between employees and contractors is blurred, and employee retention is achieved only through thoughtful analysis. These changes have led to the rise of a new, more flexible style of management.

Today's leaders, executives, and managers are more aware of the needs of their staff. They understand that communication in the workplace is indispensable in building a successful organization.

A key component of this level of communication is providing feedback to employees. Feedback, when done right, can lead to better performance, higher productivity, more job satisfaction, better relationships at work, and less conflict—for managers and for everyone on their teams.

Unfortunately, many managers feel that offering feedback is one of their most difficult tasks. For many managers and executives, this means simply avoiding giving feedback at all.

## **Shocking Statistics**

A December, 2009, study of 291 organizations in the U.S. and Canada by research company Leadership IQ revealed these sobering findings:

- 65% of employees say that when their boss criticizes performance, they don't provide enough useful information to help employees correct the issue.
- 66% of employees say they have too little interaction with their supervisor.
- 67% of employees say they get too little positive feedback.

If two-thirds of employees are working without receiving appropriate feedback from their superiors, it is safe to say that there is a communications crisis in the workplace.

## **The Old Workplace**

How did the workplace become what it is today? Historically, many managers have been aloof, and employees have felt disconnected from their bosses. These workers have attempted to complete their tasks without receiving clear direction from their managers.

A study from international organizational development firm Human Synergistics, reported that "90% of employees work in a negative workplace culture of blame, indecision and conformity."

## **A Surprising Fact**

This leads to what is, for many, a surprising fact:

The number one reason why people leave their positions is lack of praise.

These workers feel alone, dissatisfied, and unappreciated. Receiving feedback from their bosses could make the difference between staying on the job and moving on to another employer, causing their current organization to deal with the cost and hassle of hiring new employees.

In surveys done by Ovson Communications, the workplace environment for our clients is as follows:

- ◆ More than 60% seldom, if ever, receive personal thanks.
- ◆ More than 75% seldom, if ever, receive written thanks.
- ◆ More than 80% seldom, if ever, receive public praise.

Avoiding giving feedback has been the preferred management style of many executives for these reasons:

- ◆ The hope that a situation will work itself out and improve without management intervention.
- ◆ Managers are afraid that recipients of their feedback will react negatively to the feedback, creating an uncomfortable work environment.
- ◆ Managers feel that it takes less time to perform a task themselves than it would to offer feedback and oversee the changes needed in their team members to perform the task to the manager's liking.
- ◆ Giving feedback has, in the past, made a bad situation worse.

### **Change Is Essential**

The reality is: the effects of poor feedback cost organizations too much. Poorly executed or inappropriate feedback affects employee motivation, effectiveness, and productivity.

These negative trends need not be the reality in the workplace. Feedback can be used by managers to improve the workplace environment, increase productivity, and lessen tension among team members. Understanding and recognizing the characteristics of various types of feedback will allow managers to use feedback appropriately.

# Types of Feedback

There are three types of feedback used by executives and managers with their staff: negative feedback, positive feedback, and constructive feedback. Each type has specific characteristics and effects.

## Type One: Negative Feedback

Negative feedback includes all messages—verbal or written—from manager to employee that use negative language and have the primary purpose of belittling the employee, denigrating the work done by the employee, or both.

Negative feedback is often the type of feedback adults associate with difficult aspects of their own childhood. Parents, family members, and educators all appear to children to be experts at giving negative feedback. Consequently, when employees, as adults, receive negative feedback in the workplace, they can feel as powerless as children facing overbearing authority figures.

Managers are certainly responsible for delivering criticism to their employees, and there are times when negative criticism is appropriate. But, it can be dangerous. Negative feedback can easily take the form of attacking the employee directly rather than criticizing the quality of the work done.

Common examples of this aggressive style of negative feedback include:

- ◆ “Can’t you do anything right?”
- ◆ “You stink. “
- ◆ “You’re no good at xyz.”
- ◆ “You’ve messed up.”

Each of these examples uses the word “you” and describes an aspect of the employee rather than a detail of the employee’s work.

Another style of negative feedback is more subtle and is familiar to virtually every member of the workforce. This feedback begins with a positive comment and is then followed by the word “but.” “But” is then followed by a litany of everything done incorrectly by the employee.

Many managers confuse this style of negative feedback with either positive feedback or constructive feedback. To the recipient of this feedback, it is clear that the feedback is just as negative as a straightforward negative comment that was not preceded by a positive phrase. The positive comment at the beginning does not mitigate the impact of the negative message.

## **Type 2: Positive Feedback:**

Positive feedback includes written and verbal messages that express approval or praise. Known in technical terms as “Positive Enforcement Feedback”, positive feedback is often associated with a favorite coach or teacher, and more rarely parents, who give direct praise to children.

This is the type of feedback to give when the employee is doing something right and the manager wants them to continue doing it.

Common examples of Positive Feedback:

- ◆ “That was great.”
- ◆ “Good job.”
- ◆ “That shot was beautiful.”

Positive feedback is important for four reasons:

1. It shows staff that management pays attention and notices when staff members carry out work tasks correctly.
2. It highlights to staff what management expects from them.
3. It enforces and promotes positive performance.
4. It keeps morale high even in the toughest situations.

## **Type 3: Constructive Feedback**

Constructive feedback gives recipients specific, concrete steps to improve performance on future tasks. The ability of constructive feedback to shape the future positively is the biggest difference between it and the other forms of feedback. Constructive feedback is neither criticism (as there is no blame) nor a personal insult (as in telling a staff member, “You are just lazy.”) Most importantly, constructive feedback is not closed. (“This is it, and that’s final.”)

Constructive feedback is inviting, respectful and behavior-based. This type of feedback gives staff the opportunity to fix what is wrong or not working and also allows staff to grow personally and professionally. Constructive feedback is seldom associated with childhood experiences and is appropriate for professional situations.

Constructive feedback includes such statements as:

- ◆ “Here is a hint for doing this better next time.”
- ◆ “If you modulate your voice more, you’ll project more confidence to your audience.”
- ◆ “You can improve your performance by doing xyz.”

Constructive feedback plays a significant role in the workplace:

1. It replaces negative feedback.
2. It specifically addresses the task or behavior that needs improvement without antagonizing the staff member.
3. It improves relationships between supervisors and their employees.

### **Being Specific is the Key**

Most managers and executives utilize all three types of feedback, and they can improve any feedback given to staff by being specific. Vague words, even if positive or constructive, will not achieve the results managers are looking for.

If negative feedback must be given, managers need to be detailed in their wording. While it may be tempting for managers to say, “You messed up,” this is not as effective as saying, “The level of detail you provided in the proposal was inadequate for such an important client.” This more lengthy statement is certainly negative, but it is focused on a specific aspect of the work and lets the employee know exactly what is wrong.

Even positive feedback can incorporate specific details. A staff member will get a quick morale boost from hearing, “That was great” from a manager, but being told just what aspect of the work was great is much more useful for the employee. Managers and executives who substitute precise descriptions for vague words such as “that,” “this,” “it,” and “thing,” will benefit from being unambiguous when giving positive feedback to staff.

Constructive feedback, by its very nature, demands exact wording. This type of feedback must be well thought-out and must include specific characteristics of the work task.

## Feedback Examples

The following examples show how specific wording improves feedback and can even change the very nature of the feedback itself:

### Example 1: Positive Feedback

**Do:** "When you spoke to potential customer XYZ, I noticed that you did your homework on the company's financials and history. That was great! This is what new clients look for."

**Don't:** "You communicated well with clients."

Example 1 reveals why the work is great, giving the employee a repeatable task for future projects. The "Do" approach creates effective and motivating communication between manager and staff.

### Example 2: Constructive Feedback

**Do:** "When you were doing the XYZ presentation last week, I noticed that you did not conclude your talk. If you had mentioned the project highlights and then summarized our position on it, it would have helped bring the whole presentation together. "

**Don't:** "You are not good at delivering presentations."

Example 2 is a convincing case for changing negative feedback into constructive feedback. The longer version is neutral in tone and does not attack the employee's character or skills.

# **The Zen of Feedback – The Threefold Path**

Each of the three types of feedback represents a path that will be traveled by team members. The feedback itself may only take a few seconds to deliver. However, the effect caused by the feedback will be visited repeatedly in the future, and both leaders and their employees will want those visits to be as positive as possible.

The fallout from feedback is not limited to the manager and the specific employee who received the feedback. The effects—both positive and negative—will be experienced by other staff members as well.

## **Path of Destruction**

Negative feedback creates a path of destruction. What is destroyed? Morale and a sense of teamwork. Furthermore, employees lose their commitment to goals and projects when confronted with negative feedback.

When negative feedback specifically targets an employee, rather than the employee's work, the recipient of the feedback often experiences feelings of inadequacy or hostility. These reactions make the feedback counter-productive, creating resentment and conflict throughout the workplace. This conflict destroys any hope of completing the necessary tasks that keep the workplace functioning. Once the destructive path has begun, the damage consumes other people in the workplace.

## **Path of Energy**

Positive feedback produces a path of energy. Employees who receive positive feedback feel happier, more energized, and motivated. They wish to continue the style of work that led to the positive feedback.

This positive energy spreads outward from the recipient of the feedback and affects other team members. As additional positive feedback is given in the workplace, managers and their subordinates will feel a greater sense of teamwork and cooperation.

## **Path of Appreciation**

Constructive feedback establishes a path of appreciation. The employee appreciates that the manager is offering specific, detailed suggestions for improving work outcomes. Receiving these details actually makes completing

projects easier since clear guidelines are established by the constructive feedback.

Both manager and employee acknowledge through the constructive feedback process that straightforward, open communication is possible in the workplace. This allows the manager, the employee, and other workers to expect this style of communication in the future.

### **Following the Threefold Path Approach**

Managers and executives face a choice every time they give feedback. They choose not just the type of feedback to use, but also a style of workplace behavior that will affect staff in the future. By understanding that short-lived feedback has enduring consequences affecting everyone in the workplace, managers realize that the path created by the feedback is more important than the feedback itself.

The Threefold Path Approach to giving feedback represents the awareness of these consequences and an understanding of the steps needed to get the best results.

### **Specific Steps of the Threefold Path**

1. Avoid the temptation to travel down the negative, destructive path. The negative path is the easiest to travel, the most enticing, and the most comfortable. But, it leads to destruction.
2. Instead, travel first on the positive, energetic path. This path offers immediate gratification to the recipient of the positive feedback and strengthens bonds between managers and staff. However, positive feedback alone is not enough to change the work environment, eliminate sources of tension and anxiety, and give employees the direction they need from management.
3. Complete the journey on the constructive, appreciative path. This path requires detailed analysis and careful wording, but ultimately is the most rewarding for manager, employee, and the organization itself.

Utilizing the Threefold Path Approach gives managers the opportunity to think clearly before they deliver feedback to staff. The act of resisting delivery of negative feedback forces managers to be more thoughtful and to offer feedback better suited to the needs of both workers and the organization. This approach is results-driven, not emotion-laden.

# The Feedback Success Formula

The Threefold Path Approach gives managers and executives a clear picture of the effects of their choices when giving feedback. If the dangerous consequences caused by the destructive path of negative feedback are to be avoided in the workplace, then creating a combination of the other two paths appears most beneficial for the work environment.

This leads directly to the **Feedback Success Formula**:

$$\text{Beneficial Feedback} = (\text{Positive Feedback} + \text{Constructive Feedback}) - \text{Negative Feedback}$$

This formula provides the “how to” for managers and executives searching for a style of feedback that maximizes benefit for all team members and has lasting effects in the workplace. The order is crucial: positive feedback is given first on one specific issue at a time, constructive feedback second. The positive feedback reinforces successful behavior and outcomes, and the constructive feedback makes adjustments and optimizes performance. Negative feedback is eliminated.

## Recommendations for Givers of Negative Feedback

Managers who have traditionally given only negative feedback will need to utilize the Feedback Success Formula with great care. Before these managers allow themselves to deliver feedback, they will need to work the formula from back to front by 1) acknowledging that the words they are formulating are in a negative feedback style, 2) rewording the thought to create constructive feedback, and 3) adding a positive comment to the front of the constructive feedback. Only after these three steps have been completed mentally will the manager be able to deliver feedback in a format acceptable to subordinates.

A similar strategy is needed for managers who have formed the habit of preceding negative feedback with a positive comment and the word “but.” Leaders with this communication style will benefit from questioning the effect their communication behavior has on their subordinates and employing the following steps: 1) keep the positive comment in the feedback, 2) change negative feedback to constructive feedback, and 3) replace the word “but” with “and.”

## **Effects of the Feedback Success Formula**

As described above, constructive feedback serves as a replacement for negative feedback. Constructive feedback implies that something is wrong while simultaneously including specific steps to correct the behavior or task needing improvement. With the use of constructive feedback, there is no need for negative feedback in the workplace. Negative feedback is simply eliminated from the organizational culture and hence subtracted from the process of delivering feedback.

The Feedback Success Formula offers a clear choice for delivering feedback that will have positive results. This formula can become an integral part of the institutional culture in the workplace.

## Six Tips for Giving Great Feedback

1. **Assess current feedback style.** Managers who are not getting the results they want from their staff must examine their communication style. By discovering what path they are on and deciding which path they would like to be on, managers will understand what is not working and be able to change their approach.
2. **Use positive feedback and constructive feedback.** Managers and executives will get better results when they delete negative feedback from their management mindset.
3. **Choose the correct timing for feedback.** Feedback is most effective when given as soon as possible after a behavior has occurred.
4. **Ask for self-assessment.** Managers can get staff members involved in the feedback process by asking them for their own assessment. Questions such as “What did you think went well?” and “What didn’t go so well?” start a constructive dialogue. Self-assessment builds self-awareness for employees and encourages them to be part of the feedback process.
5. **Be specific.** Avoid general feedback. Use specific incidents and behaviors. When managers and executives make feedback specific and behavior-based, they avoid hurting the employee’s ego and minimize resistance to the feedback.
6. **Limit feedback to the three most important points.** Good managers identify key leveraging points that will make the biggest improvement in their employees’ behavior. If a manager critiques everything, the employee will get overwhelmed and will not improve. When managers give feedback on key, specific behaviors and make sure these behaviors get corrected, employees will focus, improve performance, and build positive momentum for further improvement.

## Summary

Ovson Communications recommends making the Feedback Success Formula a way of life. The formula is easiest to incorporate in written reviews and evaluations since wording can be carefully chosen ahead of time. Managers can also use the feedback formula in planned, verbal communication.

With practice, the feedback formula will become a part of everyday office conversations and off-the-cuff remarks (both of which are considered feedback by employees). At that point, the Feedback Success Formula will act as a remedy to the difficult conversations and resentment that have historically plagued the workplace.

Employees desire more feedback than they generally receive from their bosses. They respond well to positive and constructive feedback, and they actively resist negative feedback.

At any given moment, a manager or executive has three types of feedback available to give to employees. Each mode of feedback triggers certain reactions from staff members and has tangible repercussions regarding productivity and workplace culture. Morale, employee turnover, and even the success of the organization itself are all affected by the style of feedback used by managers.

By focusing on positive and constructive feedback while avoiding negative feedback, managers and executives build trust and teamwork in the workplace. Managers who give frequent feedback improve their ability to communicate with employees and get better at the specific skill of formulating positive and constructive phrases that will motivate their teams.

## About the Authors:

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## About Ovson Communications:

For over twenty years Ovson Communications has provided training, facilitation, coaching, and speakers to hundreds of organizations throughout the U.S. Companies from small startups to Fortune 500 companies have benefited from these services.

Specializing in improving communication among executives, managers, partners, team leaders, and team members, Ovson Communications has several [programs for executives and managers](#). One popular executive program is the [Feedback and Performance Appraisal](#), in which leaders receive feedback on their feedback! Ovson Communications offers a [Free 20-minute consultation](#) to assess the training, facilitation, and coaching needs of executives and other leaders.

For more information on Ovson Communications, please visit:  
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