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HUMAN PERFORMANCE

Delivering effective performance feedback: The strengths-based approach

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Abstract   Performance feedback has significant potential to benefit employees in terms of individual and team performance. Moreover, effective performance feedback has the potential to enhance employee engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction. However, managers often are not comfortable giving performance feedback and such feedback, if improperly relayed, causes more harm than good. In this installment of HUMAN PERFORMANCE, we describe a shift from traditional weaknesses-based feedback (which relies on negative commentary focused on employees' shortcomings) to the more constructive approach of strengths-based feedback (which relies on employee affirmation and encouragement). We explain why a strengths-based approach to performance feedback is superior to the weaknesses-centered approach, and offer nine research-based recommendations on how to deliver effective performance feedback employing a strengths-based method.

Success is achieved by developing our strengths, not by eliminating our weaknesses.
∼ Marilyn vos Savant

1. Building up vs. breaking down

A key responsibility of successful managers is to help their employees improve job performance on an ongoing basis (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2011). Managers carry out this responsibility by implementing performance management systems that are designed to align performance at the individual, unit, and organizational levels. Notably, performance

feedback is a critical component of all performance management systems (Aguinis, 2009; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). *Performance feedback* can be defined as information about an employee's past behaviors with respect to established standards of employee behaviors and results. The goals of performance feedback are to improve individual and team performance, as well as employee engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction (Aguinis, 2009).

Unfortunately, managers are often uncomfortable giving performance feedback (Aguinis, 2009), and such feedback often does more harm than good in terms of helping employees improve their performance (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). For example, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) conducted an extensive literature review and concluded that in more than one-third of the cases, performance feedback actually resulted in decreased performance across the 131 studies

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they analyzed. Furthermore, employees involved in a qualitative study said the following about the feedback that they had received: "The feedback meeting is a conflict meeting," "It was devastating," "The process was a waste of time," and "Feedback equals criticism and it is not nice" (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011). The discrepancy between performance feedback's intended and actual consequences constitutes a major concern to employees, managers, and organizations.

Although managers share an intuitive understanding that feedback plays a crucial role in improving individual and team performance, many managers do not know how to deliver feedback effectively. More specifically, managers quite frequently provide feedback in a manner that is excessively focused on employees' weaknesses. Yet, the same managers are typically unaware that such weaknesses-based feedback often fails to improve employee performance. To fully reap the benefits of using feedback, managers should instead primarily rely on a strengths-based approach to feedback that consists of identifying employees' areas of positive behavior and results that stem from their knowledge, skills, or talents. Next, we describe the traditional weaknesses-centered approach to feedback, the novel strengths-based approach, and why the strengths-based approach is superior. We close with a set of nine research-based recommendations on how to give effective performance feedback using a strengths-based approach.

2. The traditional weaknesses-based approach to feedback

Under the *weaknesses-based approach to feedback*, managers identify their employees' weaknesses (e.g., deficiencies in terms of their job performance, knowledge, and skills); provide negative feedback on what the employees are doing wrong or what the employees did not accomplish; and, finally, ask them to improve their behaviors or results by overcoming their weaknesses. The rationale behind weaknesses-based feedback is that weaknesses are areas where employees have potential to improve, and it is assumed that informing them of these problems will motivate them to improve their performance. In other words, the assumption is that, absent such communication, employees will not improve their performance (Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004).

Because employees' weaknesses can be detrimental to not only individual but also team and organizational performance, managers often point out what the employee did wrong and why the employee needs to improve. Such negative

feedback can be illustrated with the following conversation between Tony, a branch manager at a bank, and Lisa, a teller at the bank:

Tony: Lisa, you haven't been greeting customers by saying, "Hi, welcome to XYZ Bank." We've talked about this a number of times now.

Lisa: I haven't done it a couple of times, but I'm getting better.

Tony: Okay; well, then, I need you to do even better. We need to make sure that we receive high customer service rankings so that we can get a big bonus at the end of the year.

Lisa: (Thinking to herself: *He hasn't paid any attention to what I have been doing. I've been greeting almost all of my customers the way that he has asked. He never acknowledges me when I do things right and takes it for granted, but he sure is quick to point out any relative shortcomings. What a jerk!*)

Although weaknesses-based feedback informs employees that certain behaviors and results are inappropriate or inadequate, several studies have concluded that such feedback entails unintended negative consequences. For example, negative feedback and criticism often lead to employee dissatisfaction, defensive reactions, a decreased desire to improve individual performance, and less actual improvement in the same (Burke, Weitzel, & Weir, 1978; Jawahar, 2010; Kay, Meyer, & French, 1965). Negative feedback is also frequently perceived as being inaccurate, and is unlikely to be accepted by the person receiving it (Fedor, Eder, & Buckley, 1989; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). When feedback is focused on employee weaknesses, those giving the feedback generally adopt negative views of and attitudes toward the employees being evaluated (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004). These negative consequences help explain the general lack of empirical support for the benefits of feedback and why many managers have not experienced significant success in using feedback to boost employee performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Next, we describe an alternative and superior approach to feedback.

3. The superior strengths-based approach to feedback

Under the *strengths-based approach to feedback*, managers identify their employees' strengths in

terms of their exceptional job performance, knowledge, skills, and talents; provide positive feedback on what the employees are doing to succeed based on such strengths; and, finally, ask them to maintain or improve their behaviors or results by making continued or more intensive use of their strengths. The reasons behind strengths-based feedback are that employee strengths are of great potential for growth and development, and that highlighting how these strengths can generate success on the job motivates employees to intensify the use of their strengths to produce even more positive behaviors and results (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

In contrast to weaknesses-based feedback, strengths-based feedback enjoys a significant number of advantages with few, if any, negative consequences. For example, strengths-based feedback enhances individual well-being and engagement (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This effect is particularly noteworthy because employee engagement is negatively related to turnover (ρ = -.30) and positively related to business-unit performance (ρ = .38) (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Strengths-based feedback also tends to increase employees' desire to improve their productivity (Jawahar, 2010) and heightens actual productivity (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Moreover, employees experience increased job satisfaction, perceptions of fairness, and motivation to improve job performance when their managers adopt helpful and constructive attitudes that are typical under the strengths-based approach (Burke et al., 1978; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Put simply: Given its documented advantages, the strengths-based approach to providing feedback is a superior alternative to the weaknesses-based approach. As is the case with many other management practices, however, execution is key (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). For instance, managers can make the mistake of being too vague, thereby limiting the potential performance and job satisfaction-related benefits that such feedback can have on employees.

So, what can managers do to improve the effectiveness of performance feedback? To answer this question, we provide nine research-based recommendations on how to deliver feedback focused on a strengths-based approach.

4. Research-based recommendations for implementing a strengths-based approach to performance feedback

Table 1 represents a summary of our nine recommendations. Based on earlier discussion, our first recommendation is to focus on a strengths-based approach. The strengths-based approach involves identifying strengths, providing positive feedback on how employees are using their strengths to exhibit desirable behaviors and achieve beneficial results, and asking them to maintain or improve their behaviors or results by making continued or more intensive use of their strengths.

The second recommendation is to not completely abandon a discussion of weaknesses, but concentrate on employees' knowledge (i.e., facts and lessons learned) and skills (i.e., steps of an activity) rather than talents (i.e., naturally or mainly innately recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior). The feedback should be focused thus because knowledge and skills can be learned and improved, while talents are typically inherent to the individual. Given this recommendation, what are managers to do when an employee's inappropriate behaviors or inadequate results stem from weaknesses in certain talents rather than weaknesses in knowledge and skills? Our next recommendation addresses this issue.

The third recommendation is that managers adopt a strengths-based approach to managing their employees' talent weaknesses. In doing so, managers can follow Buckingham and Clifton's (2001) five suggestions. The first suggestion is to help employees improve a bit on the desired talents. But, keep in mind that employees are unlikely to substantially improve the talents that they lack. The second suggestion is that both managers and employees should design a support system that will serve as a crutch for talent weaknesses. For example, employees who engage in public speaking can remain calm by imagining that the audience members are naked. According to Buckingham and Clifton's third suggestion, managers should encourage their employees to see how their strongest talents can compensate for their talent weaknesses. For example, if an employee possesses the talent of responsibility yet struggles in networking because he possesses few social talents, then help the employee see that networking is an important responsibility. To follow the fourth suggestion, make it easier for employees to work with partners who possess the talents that the employees lack. The fifth and final suggestion is to prevent employees from engaging in tasks that strongly require talents they lack. Ways to implement this last suggestion include re-designing jobs for employees who are deficient in certain talents or giving other employees the responsibilities that require talents certain employees lack.

The fourth recommendation in Table 1 is that the person providing feedback needs to be familiar with the individual reviewee's knowledge, skills, and

Table 1. Nine recommendations for delivering effective performance feedback focusing on a strengths-based approach

Recommendation	Short description
1. Adopt the strengths-based approach as the primary means of providing feedback	• Identify employees' strengths. • Provide positive feedback on how employees are using their strengths to exhibit desirable behaviors and achieve beneficial results. • Ask employees to maintain or improve their behaviors or results by making continued or more intensive use of their strengths.
2. Closely link any negative feedback to employees' knowledge and skills rather than talents	• Focus weaknesses-based feedback on knowledge and skills (which are more changeable) rather than talents (which are more difficult to acquire).
3. Adopt a strengths-based approach to managing employees' talent weaknesses	• Help employees improve a bit on the desired talents with an understanding that employees are unlikely to substantially improve the talents that they lack. • Create a support system that will serve as a crutch for a talent weakness. • Encourage employees to see how their strongest talents can compensate for their talent weaknesses. • Make it easier for employees to work with partners who possess the talents that they lack. • Re-design jobs for employees who are deficient in certain talents, and give other employees the responsibilities that require talents that certain employees lack.
4. Make sure the person providing feedback is familiar with the employee and the employee's job requirements	• Make sure you are familiar with the employee's knowledge, skills, and talents. • Make sure you are familiar with the employee's job requirements and work context.
5. Choose an appropriate setting when giving feedback	• Deliver feedback in a private setting.
6. Deliver the feedback in a considerate manner	• Provide at least three pieces of positive feedback for every piece of negative feedback. • Start the feedback session by asking the employee what is working. • Allow employees to participate in the feedback process.
7. Provide feedback that is specific and accurate	• Avoid making general statements such as "Good job!" • Evaluate and give feedback closely based on concrete evidence.
8. Tie feedback to important consequences at various levels throughout the organization	• Explain that the behaviors exhibited and results achieved by the employee have an important impact not only on the employee in terms of rewards or disciplinary measures, but also on the team, unit, or even organization.
9. Follow up	• Provide specific directions by including a development plan and checking up on any progress that is made after a certain period of time.

talents, as well as his or her job requirements (Fulk, Brief, & Barr, 1985; Kinicki, Prussia, Wu, & Mckee-Ryan, 2004; Landy, Barnes, & Murphy, 1978; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). This is important because the credibility of the feedback provider can be quickly lost if feedback is given improperly. An example of feedback coming from a source with insufficient familiarity is when a district manager, who is not involved in the day-to-day operations of a work group and does not know the job requirements and work context very well, visits a local office and provides feedback that is based on hearsay or indirect third-party information.

Our fifth specific recommendation is to choose an appropriate setting when giving feedback, as the setting/location in which feedback is delivered truly matters. Specifically, feedback should be relayed in a private rather than public setting. Receiving feedback in front of coworkers can be very demeaning and detrimental to the employee. Also, although most people do not have a problem receiving strengths-based feedback in public, managers

should take into account that certain individuals may be uncomfortable in the spotlight of public praise or recognition. Regardless of the approach, public feedback will not result in positive consequences if given in the wrong setting.

Our sixth recommendation is to deliver feedback in a considerate manner (Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). One way of doing so is to maintain an optimal ratio between strengths- and weaknesses-based feedback. That is, a manager should provide at least three pieces of positive feedback for every piece of negative feedback (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011). Another way of providing feedback in a considerate manner is to start the feedback by asking the employee what is working (Foster & Lloyd, 2007). Doing so allows the employee to feel more hopeful regarding their future and remain less defensive when negative feedback is given (Foster & Lloyd, 2007). Finally, we also encourage managers to allow employees to participate in the feedback process. Employees' satisfaction with their given feedback increases and their defensiveness decreases when they have an active role in the feedback process (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998).

Our seventh recommendation is that feedback should be specific and accurate. It should center on certain work behaviors and results, as well as the situations in which these were observed (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004). Avoid making general statements such as "Good job," "You're struggling today," or "Pick up the pace." Lack of specificity will result in failure to get the message through (Aguinis, 2009). In addition to being specific, feedback must be accurate (Elicker, Levy, & Hall, 2006; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). One way to maximize accuracy is to rely on concrete evidence (Jawahar, 2010).

Under our eighth recommendation, we encourage managers to give feedback that ties employee behaviors and results to other important consequences at various levels throughout the organization (Aguinis, 2009). Specifically, the person providing feedback should explain that the behaviors exhibited and results achieved by the employee have an important impact on not only the employee in terms of rewards or disciplinary measures, but also that person's team, unit, and even organization (Aguinis, 2009). If employees' behaviors and results are not explained as being closely linked to other important outcomes, employees might develop the impression that their positive behaviors and results produced by their strengths are not sufficiently beneficial or important; they may similarly think that their negative behaviors and results are not particularly detrimental or significant.

Finally, our ninth recommendation is to follow up on feedback (Aguinis, 2009). Doing so entails providing specific directions to the employee through a development plan, as well as checking up on any progress that is made after a certain period of time. Via such diligence, employees will recognize that the feedback should be taken seriously.

5. How it's done: The nine principles of effective performance feedback at play

How would our recommended principles of feedback play out in an actual feedback session? Recall the conversation between Tony and Lisa that we used previously to provide an example of concepts related to feedback. Now, consider the following vignette in which Tony has been informally observing Lisa's performance and decides to provide feedback, both because of things she did well and areas in which she could improve when interacting with customers:

Tony: Lisa, after helping the remaining customers in line, will you come talk to me in my office? I want to compliment you on the great work you have been doing. I also want to talk about areas in which you can improve to become even better.

(10 minutes later)

Tony: Come in, Lisa; have a seat. As I mentioned earlier, I want to talk to you about some of the great things that you've been doing lately, as well as areas where you can improve. I'd like this time to be about how I can help you be your very best.

Lisa: I hope I have been doing well. I've been trying.

Tony: I can tell. Specifically, in what ways do you feel like you've been standing out?

Lisa: Well, maybe it's just me, but I hate it when our customers have to wait in line. Because of this, I really try my best to work quickly so that people don't have to wait so long.

Tony: That's really good. In fact, our monthly figures show that of all the tellers during the month of April, you conducted the most transactions. How does that make you feel?

Lisa: Really? I even took a few vacation days last month.

Tony: And because of your great work, we have a $50 gift card for you.

Lisa: Wow, thanks!

Tony: Obviously, you're great at being quick and efficient when working with customers. How do you feel this affects the quality of interactions that you have with them?

Lisa: I'm not sure. I can see that I could probably be more engaging, but I figure our customers just want to get in and get out. I mean, I always make sure that I greet them and ask how their day is going. So, I feel like I have a good balance between speed and quality.

Tony: I like how you are maintaining such a good balance; that's why you're one of our most accomplished employees. At the same time, I want to fulfill my duty of helping you become even better, so I'd appreciate your reflection on our monthly teller goal of 15 referrals for new bank accounts, checking accounts, and credit cards. Last month you had four referrals, and so far this month you've acquired two. How do you feel you're doing in this area?

Lisa: I guess I'm not doing as well as I probably could. I get so concerned with moving people through the line that I forget to ask them if they want to start up new accounts.

Tony: I see. So it seems that you are more likely to ask for referrals when there isn't a line, but when there is a line, you have a tendency to not ask for referrals. I want you to remember that your monthly bonus and the bank's overall yearly bonus are tied directly to the number of referrals you get. I want you to be happy with your bonuses, so what do you think you can do better?

Lisa: Now that I think about it, I do typically ask for referrals when there isn't a line. I don't know. I always see the prompting on the computer screen before I end a transaction, but I just don't want to inconvenience the people standing in line.

Tony: Preventing customer inconvenience is an important aspect of the job. So, what if, rather than asking people at the end of transactions whether they're interested in a new account, you instead ask them while you are running their transactions?

Lisa: Hmm, that's actually a good idea. I always just think about it after I am done with the transaction. Let me give it a shot the next few days and see how it goes.

Tony: Great. I'll follow up with you at the end of the week. Why don't we plan on having another conversation like this before you go to lunch on Friday?

Lisa: That sounds good. I'll look forward to it. Thanks!

In this vignette, Tony followed nearly all of the recommendations for effective strengths-based feedback. He began the interview by praising and discussing in detail Lisa's strengths, but he did not shy away from discussing her weaknesses, either. Tony emphasized how Lisa can use her strengths to improve performance even further, and demonstrated that he was familiar with the work Lisa was doing. By establishing a proper setting in which to provide his feedback, Tony guaranteed that the conversation was confidential, thereby limiting any defensiveness on Lisa's part. To ensure Lisa that he was providing credible feedback, Tony was considerate and very specific. Although Tony did not discuss three positive pieces of feedback for each piece of negative feedback, he did provide Lisa with a reward in the form of a gift card, which probably made her more open to the weaknesses-based feedback that he provided. In addition, Tony's feedback was based on concrete evidence; for example, he was able to motivate Lisa to mention when she had a tendency to ask for referrals and when she did not. Tony also discussed how Lisa's lack of referrals tied into specific rewards, demonstrating that referrals were important to her as well as to the bank. Finally, Tony gave Lisa some time to improve her behavior and then established when he could follow up with her.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of performance feedback is to improve individual and team performance, as well as employee engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction. In this article, we described two alternative approaches to feedback: the traditional weaknesses-based approach and the superior strengths-based approach. There are significant negative consequences associated with the exclusive use of the weaknesses-based approach. Accordingly, managers should primarily adopt a strengths-based approach, which focuses on what employees do well and encourages the continued and further use of

these strengths. Table 1 provides a summary of nine specific recommendations on how to deliver feedback using a strengths-based approach. Following these recommendations will not only improve future performance, but also make it easier for managers to deliver feedback that will result in important benefits for employees, managers, and organizations.

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