

Feedback Without the Sting: How to Use Feedback for Team Success

Sandra Mashih, PhD and Kenneth Nowack, PhD

Imagine you've dedicated weeks to a project, meticulously perfecting every detail and working overtime. Then, during a meeting, your manager comments, "This could have been done better." Your heart sinks. Does this scenario sound familiar?

Feedback, whether giving or receiving, is a critical yet challenging aspect of professional growth. It often feels like a personal attack, though its purpose is to aid our improvement. Feedback is tough because it directly challenges our self-perception. Poorly delivered, it can be disheartening, but when executed well, it can be transformative.

Why is feedback so challenging? According to neuroscience, our brains process social rejection and negative feedback similarly to physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003). This similarity explains why a casual remark from a boss or colleague can sting as much as a physical injury, leading many to avoid giving feedback fearing it will cause pain or damage relationships.

Many leaders hesitate to give candid feedback, concerned about potential conflicts. However, avoiding feedback can have dire consequences, including missed opportunities for improvement, declining performance, and mounting frustration. Without clear guidance, employees may believe they are performing well until significant problems surface. In

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contrast, organizations that cultivate a culture of clear and constructive feedback often enjoy higher engagement, stronger teams, and superior outcomes. Effective feedback is more than highlighting mistakes—it's about helping someone understand, accept, and act on this guidance, requiring empathy, clarity, and a coaching mindset.

Feedback extends beyond a simple one-on-one interaction; it is an ongoing, dynamic series of conversations and methods that enhance engagement, growth, and leadership development. Effective feedback involves multiple components, including the content, tone, and purpose of the message, as well as the dynamics between the giver and the receiver.

In our consulting, training, and coaching projects, we often hear leaders complain: *"I've given feedback numerous times, and my employees don't change."* *"I am spending more time trying to fix the mistakes of my direct reports than developing other employees."* *"I just can't communicate with millennials (or Gen Zers). They are too entitled."* Conversely, employees frequently express: *"My supervisor only focuses on what I do wrong. I never receive positive reinforcement."* *"My boss does not listen."* *"My leader is not clear or transparent."* Given that this feedback gap contributes to frustration for both leaders and employees, we believe it is more important than ever for organizations to create a participative culture that facilitates psychological safety and interpersonal trust in the workplace.

Consider the case of a highly competent yet interpersonally abrasive manager, fitting the archetype often referred to as a "competent jerk." This individual falls within the "Performance Management" category of our *Performance Feedback Coaching* model (see Figure 5.1, Mashihi & Nowack, 2025). This category specifically addresses individuals with high competence and low interpersonal skills who are traditionally challenging and sometimes difficult to lead (see our "Dos" and "Don'ts" for providing feedback for difficult employees).

Through our model, we approach such cases by illuminating the impact of their behavior on others, sometimes employing tools like 360 feedback assessments and an effective feedback coaching process. By doing so, we highlight the areas for improvement and provide

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a structured path to foster awareness and change, helping them understand the unintentional “sting” their actions may cause. Before delivering feedback, it is crucial to consider several factors to ensure it is effective and constructive. Here is a checklist to guide leaders and coaches in the feedback process:

Does the feedback need to be shared?

Does the feedback need to be shared **now**?

Do you have a relationship that will facilitate understanding, acceptance, and a commitment to action from your feedback?

Will the information help the individual grow and develop?

Will the change in behavior based on the feedback help the recipient to be more successful?

Has the feedback shared something that has never been brought up (e.g., new or surprising)?

Will the feedback likely result in a defensive or emotional response?

Is the desired behavior change realistic in terms of the magnitude of change and effort required?

Is the recipient going to be motivated to make changes based on the feedback? Is it likely that even with effort the recipient truly can change their behavior?

Leaders must develop effective strategies for engaging and developing employees at all levels to ensure retention and high performance. We have distilled the most effective feedback models and techniques to help leaders achieve three crucial objectives:

- *Ensure understanding:* Help employees understand the feedback they receive.
- *Foster acceptance:* Encourage employees to accept the feedback.
- *Motivate action:* Inspire employees to act on the feedback.

With these objectives in mind, let’s explore practical steps you can take to ensure that feedback is not only given effectively but also received in a manner that fosters growth and improvement.

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Steps to Giving Effective Feedback

For feedback to be meaningful and actionable on the part of the employee, consider the following 10 steps:

1. *Create psychological safety:* Schedule and define the purpose of the meeting in advance. Before giving feedback, ensure the recipient feels secure. Establish trust that the feedback is well-intentioned, starting with supportive comments like, “I want to support your growth in this role, and I have some observations that could help.”
2. *Be specific and objective:* Use simple, direct, and clear language. Avoid vague feedback. For instance, instead of saying, “You need to be more proactive,” specify observed behaviors: “In last week’s meeting, you waited for direction instead of offering solutions. Let’s explore how you can take the initiative.”
3. *Focus on impact, not intent:* People rarely intend to underperform. Focus on the outcomes rather than motives: “When deadlines are missed, it disrupts the entire team’s workflow,” keeping the conversation solutions oriented.
4. *Feed-forward to enhance acceptance:* When giving feedback, emphasize future-oriented behaviors.
5. *Encourage dialogue:* Feedback should be a two-way conversation. Engage the recipient with questions like, “How do you see this situation?” or “What challenges are you facing?” This promotes shared problem-solving.
6. *Practice active listening:* Actively listen and acknowledge the employee’s perspective (paraphrase, summarize and ask open-ended questions) to defuse defensiveness.
7. *Manage your emotions:* Focus on your own breathing (e.g., cyclic sighing) to calm any anxiety you might be experiencing. Monitor your tendency to respond without understanding and interrupting the employee that will likely contribute to a defensive reaction.

To learn more about the art of giving feedback, explore our book *Performance Feedback Strategies* for deeper insights and practical tools.

8. *Demonstrate caring and empathy:* Remember that feedback is received better when the intent and spirit is to be helpful, constructive, and intended to help the employee improve performance and skills. Be compassionate and caring but don't say things like "I feel so bad about saying this" or "This is really hard for me to do."
9. *Check in with your own judgements, biases and/or misperceptions:* Ensure your own biases of the individual are not interfering in the feedback you are providing.
10. *Define next steps:* Find a mutually agreeable solution. Effective feedback concludes with clear action steps, such as, "Let's check in next week to see how these adjustments are working for you," reinforcing accountability and ongoing support.

Feedback as a Leadership Skill

Great leaders do more than evaluate performance; they coach, develop, and inspire. Regular feedback can significantly increase employee engagement and commitment. In fact, 96 percent of employees say they desire regular feedback (Zenger & Folkman, 2024). Our *Performance Feedback Coaching* model (Figure 1) enables leaders to assess employee competence that translates into an evaluation of job performance and interpersonal skills, providing tailored feedback that addresses specific needs, whether they involve skill development, communication improvements, or both.

By categorizing employees accordingly, leaders can offer targeted feedback that enhances both personal growth and team effectiveness. Our model provides leaders with a 4-box model and specific approaches to addressing the unique needs and differences of all employees with the goals to enhance their performance and development.

- *Performance Management Feedback Coaching:* Helps the employee understand how they are perceived by others and the impact they have based on their communication, interpersonal, and leadership style. Enhances emotional and social awareness that long-term can erode engagement, trust, followership, and possibly derail their leadership career.

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- *Performance Enhancement Feedback Coaching*: Helps the employee develop and enhance specific job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences to increase overall performance and productivity.
- *Performance Acceleration Feedback Coaching*: Helps the employee build on existing job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences and foster ongoing engagement, performance, and retention.
- *Performance Improvement Feedback Coaching*: Helps the employee develop a specific and immediate improvement plan to implement with clear measures, follow-up dates to evaluate progress, and simultaneously address interpersonal deficits interfering with overall performance.

Applying a Leader-as-Performance-Coach Mindset

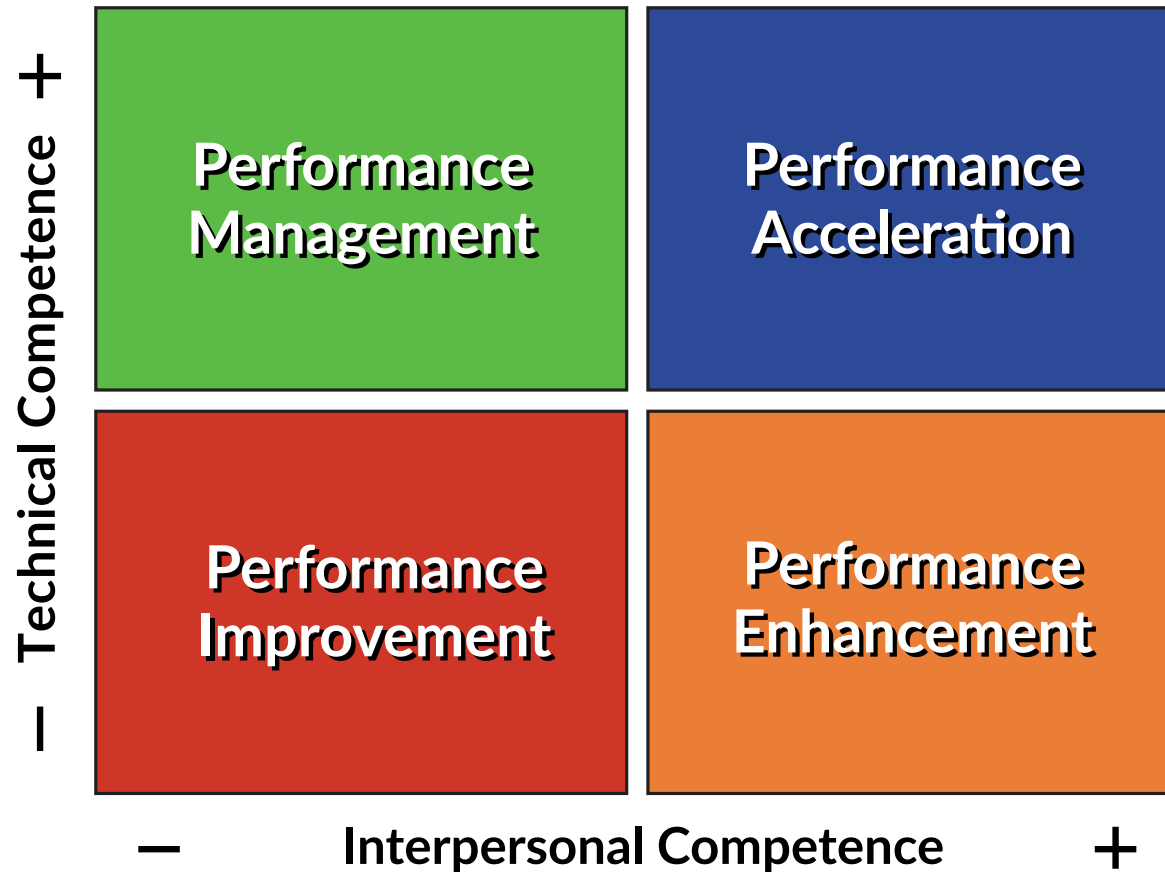
Today's employees seek genuine commitment from their employers to provide developmental feedback that enhances the skills and behaviors essential for their career and professional goals. Leaders who adopt a performance coach mindset and utilize our feedback strategies are well-equipped to retain and enhance employee performance at every organizational level.

Feedback doesn't have to be painful. When appropriately handled, it fosters development, strengthens relationships, and drives better outcomes. To master the art of feedback and learn how to implement these strategies in real-world leadership scenarios, explore our upcoming book [Performance Feedback Strategies](#) (2025) for deeper insights and practical tools. Remember, the best leaders don't just give feedback—they use it to build thriving teams.

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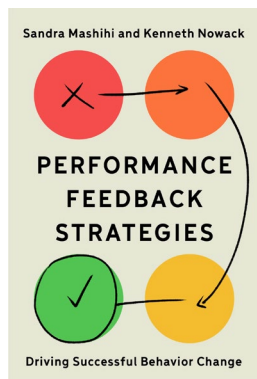
Figure 5.1 from *Performance Feedback Strategies*

Performance Coaching Feedback Model (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025)



Tool 6-2 from Performance Feedback Strategies

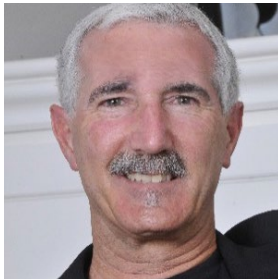
WHAT TO DO TO ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE	WHAT NOT TO DO TO MAXIMIZE DEFENSIVENESS AND CONFLICT
<p>Do remain calm and collected even when the employee deflects blame on you. Always PAUSE and check your emotions before proceeding.</p>	<p>Do not become emotional and reactive to the employee's statements.</p>
<p>Do frame your feedback in a way that motivates the employee to see what's in it for them.</p>	<p>Do not frame your feedback in a way that makes it about YOUR needs.</p>
<p>Do praise the employee when they behave correctly.</p>	<p>Do not focus entirely on what the employee is doing wrong.</p>
<p>Do use "I" statements or ownership statements that do not put blame on another person.</p>	<p>Do not use "you" statements because they can be interpreted as an attack.</p>
<p>Do focus your feedback on the impact of the behaviors</p>	<p>Do not use a "sandwich" technique, starting and ending with what the employee does exceptionally well.</p>
<p>Do give feedback on the specific behavior you want to see change.</p>	<p>Do not give feedback about the employee's personality, style, or character.</p>



Download a sample chapter of [*Performance Feedback Strategies*](#)



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