OUCH THAT HURT! FEEDBACK STRATEGIES FOR LEADERS AS PERFORMANCE COACHES

Kenneth Nowack and Sandra Mashihi share their practical, overarching performance feedback coaching model which helps leaders choose from a range of tools in pursuit of targeted growth and development

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF FEEDBACK

Most of us know from experience that receiving feedback can be emotionally charged, but did you know that giving feedback creates even more anxiety and a stronger neurophysiological response to stress?[1] You may also be surprised to learn that feedback conversations, whether at work or home, signal a potential social threat response causing our 'flight or fight' cortisol levels to remain activated nearly twice as long during particularly stressful interpersonal interactions.[2]

Adaptively, our neurophysiological systems respond to perceived threats, either real or imagined in micro-seconds. From an evolutionary perspective, our brain works continuously to ensure our survival largely by avoiding pain and seeking pleasure. In fact, the activation of our threat-and-reward circuitry operates with a speed estimated to be one-fifth of a second ahead of the activation of the planning, problem-solving, and decision-making areas of the neocortex.[3] This means we react to threats on a physiological level before we can thoroughly analyse the best way to respond. In other words, we react physically and emotionally to the threat of interpersonal interactions such as giving and receiving feedback before we can consciously process what is being expressed by others, their motivation for sharing feedback with us, or the accuracy of the messages we hear.

Unfortunately, many leaders are blind to how often their interactions with employees tend to cause what we call the cringe factor—strong emotional reactions that can leave lasting negative impacts on employees' performance, levels of engagement, and overall mental wellbeing. Many of our high-profile executive coaching assignments have focused on the interpersonal and social-competence deficits of such leaders with the goal of minimising potentially negative interactions and the emotional hurt that can occur[4]. About 20 years ago, an elegant study by UCLA psychologist Naomi Eisenberger and her colleagues demonstrated for the first time a direct overlap of the neurobiological systems governing both social and physical pain[5].

The emotional pain of social rejection, ostracisation, bullying, incivility, perceived unfair treatment, and verbal abuse all activate overlapping neural pathways specifically associated with physical hurt and suffering. More recent neuroimaging research has revealed that one specific area of the brain, the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), is highly involved with the regulation of physical pain. The dACC is activated not only when we strain a muscle, break a bone, or stub a toe but also during distressing negative interpersonal interactions.

Indeed, feedback delivered by leaders that is interpreted as being unfair, negative, discriminatory, or mean-spirited can cause great emotional distress in employees[6]. In our coaching work we have refined and drawn on the most popular and evidenced-based models and techniques to enable leaders to provide messages to employees with these three critical feedback goals in mind:

1. To ensure employees fully **understand** the feedback received.
2. To ensure employees **accept** the feedback received.
3. To ensure employees are motivated and **committed** to acting on the feedback received.

LEADERS AS PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK COACHES

Giving feedback shouldn't just be a tick-box activity for leaders, it should be an essential part of 1:1s and regular catch-up meetings. Leaders who act as effective performance coaches use a myriad of feedback strategies tailored to the unique skills, abilities, and personalities of the employees they directly supervise.

Our Performance Feedback Coaching model[7] is a framework that is designed to enhance the skills and overall performance of employees within organisations. It focuses on both the task (job performance) and relationship (emotional intelligence) dimensions providing a structured approach to tailoring conversations with employees at all levels[8]. Leaders can easily classify employees based on these two job relevant dimensions resulting in four different approaches to performance coaching.[9] These two dimensions include:

- **Overall Performance:** falling short, meeting, or exceeding mutually agreed upon key performance indicators related to project, tasks, and assignments
- **Interpersonal, Emotional, and Social Competence:** relationship skills and abilities demonstrated
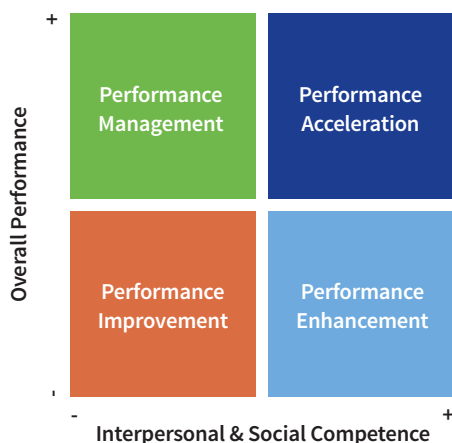
Let's look at each of the four performance coaching feedback categories, and consider some techniques and strategies that are highly effective.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Description of employee: Demonstrates moderately high to high performance on tasks, projects, and assignments but presents some interpersonal and social challenges in leading and working with others.

Coaching goals: To help the employee understand how they are perceived by others and the impact they have based on their communication, interpersonal, and leadership style. To enhance emotional and social awareness that long-term can erode engagement, trust, followership and possibly derail their leadership career.

Coaching challenges: Being open and receptive to feedback; experiencing the feedback as evaluative, judgmental, or incorrect; acting in a defensive manner to specific observations of behaviour interacting with others; arguing that their results and performance record speak for themselves; coming across to others as overly confident with a narcissistic tendency to dismiss the contributions, skills, and efforts of others.

Examples of feedback models to use:

- STICC (situation, task, intent, concern, calibrate)
- DESC (describe, express, specific, consequences)
- BOOST (balance of positive/negative, objective for change, observed, specific, timely)
- EEC (example of behavior to be addressed, effect on others, change you want to see)
- SBO/SBIS/STAR (situation, task/action/behavior, outcome/impact, suggestion)

PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT

Description of employee: Demonstrates moderately high to high emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills but meeting performance goals and standards needs to be addressed.

Coaching goals: To help the employee develop and enhance specific job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences to increase overall performance and productivity.

Coaching challenges: Translating their motivation to improve into deliberate practice to increase skills and abilities; identify and provide relevant job information, knowledge, and experience to enhance overall performance on specific tasks, projects, and assignments.

Examples of feedback models to use:

- GIVE-GET-MERGE-GO (give point of view, get point of view, merge by listening, go forward)
- IDEA (identity, describe, encourage (feedforward), action)
- OSKAR (outcome, scale, know how, affirm, action, review)
- FUEL (frame the conversation, understand current state, explore desired state, layout a plan)

PERFORMANCE ACCELERATION

Description of employee: Demonstrates moderately high to high emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills and meeting or exceeding performance goals and standards related to the job. These employees are both your high performers and high potential talent to grow and retain.

Coaching goals: To help the employee build on existing job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences and foster ongoing engagement, performance, and retention.

Coaching challenges: Focusing on only one or two specific skill areas or experiences to widen their development (e.g., heading up a new project improvement team or company-wide task force).

Examples of feedback models to use:

- CIGAR (current reality, ideal reality, gaps, action, review)
- OAR (acknowledgement, opportunities, resolution)

- CRAVE (context, review, action, viewpoint, encourage)
- WOOP (wish, outcome, obstacle, plan)
- ACHIEVE (assess the situation, creative brainstorming, hone goals, initiate options, evaluate options, validate action plans, encourage momentum)

PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

Description of employee: Not meeting or failing on agreed upon performance goals/standards while also demonstrates poor social and interpersonal skills. These employees are at risk of derailment, probation, or possible termination if performance does not improve.

Coaching goals: To help the employee develop a specific and immediate development plan to implement with clear measures, follow-up dates to evaluate progress, and simultaneously address interpersonal deficits interfering with overall performance.

Coaching challenges: Helping employees understand the seriousness of their poor performance and consequences of not making adequate progress or improvement based on a mutually agreed plan.

Examples of feedback models to use:

- GROW (goals, reality, options, way forward)
- CLEAR (contract, listen, explore, action, review)
- OSCAR (objective, scaling, choices, affirm & action, review)

Applying a leader as performance feedback coach mentality with neurotypical and neurodiverse employees

Research indicates that 15 to 20 percent of the world's population can be classified as neurodivergent[10]. In today's diverse workforce, it is important for leaders to be able to apply our Performance Feedback Coaching model with both neurotypical and neurodiverse employees. Performance feedback can be a major source of stress for neurodivergent people and can have repercussions for both engagement and talent retention.[11] It's important that leaders learn how best to communicate and provide feedback with employees who are neurodiverse.

Consider the following when communicating and providing feedback with neurodiverse employees:

- Keep in mind that beyond cultural norms, maintaining direct eye contact may not always be the same in neurotypical as it is neurodiverse individuals.
- Be aware that many neurodiverse employees prefer concrete, simple communication free from jargon, idioms, metaphors, sarcasm, nuance, and irony.
- Don't hesitate to ask about and take into consideration each employee's communication preferences.
- Schedule regular check-ins to minimise anxiety associated with less frequent formal meetings.
- Try using visual aids (e.g., diagrams, infographics, visual schedules, checklists, times, sticky notes) if that helps enhance the employee's understanding.

In exchange for their commitment to remain with organisations, employees today want a real commitment on the part of their employers to provide developmental feedback to enhance development of critical skills and behaviors associated with both their career and professional goals. Leaders who possess a mindset as a performance coach and apply our performance feedback model and strategies are well-positioned to retain and increase the overall performance of all employees, at every level.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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