A manager’s guide to GIVING EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK
Introduction

Giving employee feedback is one of the hardest tasks for managers to perfect because inherently, it’s a task that involves emotion.

Humans are emotional creatures, so when our livelihood is at stake, we become sensitive to receiving any feedback coming from our managers.

Managers have very little knowledge about the science behind giving proper feedback, which includes what words to use and avoid, body language, etc.

This is in part because dealing with emotions isn’t taught in business schools.

Implementing such a course would be a great start, especially considering that understanding people and what affects them is the first step to being a good manager.

The role of emotions in organizations is beginning to earn more attention thanks to all of the work from organizational psychologists, but there’s so much more that could be done.
Our brains are designed to prioritize negative rather than positive factors.

This has been an evolutionary advantage for us; we’re psychologically predisposed to focus on dangers rather than success.

Managers should be aware of this because one piece of negative feedback can overshadow all the other positive feedback they give.

When managers give employees negative feedback, our fear sensors activate.

This is out of our control; our brains are simply trying to protect us. If a manager has their arms crossed, speaking in a negative tone, or are giving any other sign that they are angry, that fear will only grow.

Working for a caring and empathetic manager can make all the difference. Having a manager that supports you is the real secret to employee engagement, because good employee feedback is based on trust.
Limiting themselves creates a fake character, where employees aren’t their true selves at work. As unimportant as this might seem, it can have major psychological effects.

Suppressing your identity is upsetting and psychologically depleting. Authentic self-expression is important for our personal development, and managers should be aware of this.

In a perfect world, everyone would be able to be themselves.
In short, annual performance reviews don't work.

Many companies unfortunately still use them, but there is a growing trend of companies that have decided to get rid of them in order to focus on more short-term development.

*Accenture* recently announced that they were getting rid of their annual reviews, and replacing them with more frequent check-ins with their managers.

*Deloitte* also recently announced that they were simplifying their process, having reviews a few times a year with only four questions, two of which simply require yes or no answers.

**Get Rid Of Annual Performance Reviews**
Adobe famously got rid of their annual process fairly recently. In an interview with their SVP of People, Donna Morris, she says:

“It was like a dreaded dental appointment, where once a year we would give people feedback. While our intent was for that review to be reflective of the whole previous year, in reality it was based on the most recent events.”

Donna Morris
SVP of People at Adobe

This is known as the Recency Bias, a huge problem that most people are unaware of.

Some managers tend to consider what the employee appears to have done in the last few weeks or months, rather than looking at the year in its entirety, which is what the evaluation is meant to do.
Managers cite performance reviews as the second most hated task (after firing someone), and most studies show that employees don’t like them either.

The true goal of the performance review isn’t to help the employee—it’s to help the company. A lot of people won’t tell you this, but they don’t need to document your good performance, just your poor one. That way they have written documentation that’ll help them get rid of you without fear of retribution.

Aubrey Daniels
(He coined the term “performance management”)

That’s the hidden truth of performance reviews, but it’s so ingrained in our society, that I have to question why.

They don’t work, and the process itself is so outdated.
Most of the time, the annual performance review is one-sided in the sense that it’s the manager who is telling the employee how they did and what they should do better.

It would be great if the employee could tell the manager what they’ve been doing wrong, or what the company could improve on.

Often, employees are allowed and even are encouraged to give feedback, but because of the anxiety that’s build up during the session, they choose not to.

There’s a much better way of handling employee feedback.
Set Goals For Your Employees

Of all the goal-setting techniques, Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) seem to be the most effective. The main benefit of OKRs is that they align the team around a shared goal and vision, which is one of the most important aspects of employee engagement.

Developed at Intel and later popularized by companies like Google and LinkedIn, the way OKRs work is the company sets a high-level, ambitious, somewhat vague objective, and then 2-3 specific and measurable key results.

The company has its own OKRs, and then each employee has their personal OKRs that align with the company’s objectives.

For example, the company objective could be something like: “Be the best pizza place in town” - notice how it’s both ambitious and vague.

Their key results could be:

• Receive a 95% customer satisfaction rating
• Get two articles in the local newspaper
• Get at least 25,000 Twitter followers (assuming that mattered to them).

Notice how measurable the key results are. It’s incredibly easy for us to say if we hit our goal or not.
Then the objective of the individual employee, let’s say the delivery driver, could be to “make super fast deliveries,” with their key results being:

- Make every delivery in under 30 minutes
- Ask clients to follow us on Twitter
- Come up with a means to measure customer satisfaction from deliveries

Notice how the individual key results are so aligned with the company’s objective.

This is amazing for employee engagement because employees can now clearly see how they directly affect the success of the company.

Also notice that the individual employee’s key results are not all numbers. This is a common misconception with OKRs. As long as they’re measurable, that’s all that counts.

When giving employee feedback, focus on their goals, and help employees achieve these goals by meeting with them periodically.

One of the biggest mistakes that managers make in performance appraisals is that they assume that it is their job to develop the employee. The truth is, employees already have a desire to grow and develop as humans.

Empower your employees to take charge of their development.

By setting up an environment where employees can develop, they’ll be much more receptive to negative feedback, and might even willingly seek it out from you.
How To Give Negative Feedback To An Employee

This is an inevitable part of being a manager, but something that needs to be treated very delicately.

It's a complex issue, and it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. People that are more advanced or consider themselves experts at something are more willing to hear negative feedback (and seek it out), whereas beginners are more sensitive to negative feedback.

This is usually because as people start to become experts and are more advanced, they want to get better, and they've built up that confidence.

Beginners are still trying to build up that confidence and don’t know for sure if they’re any good or not.
In the book *Daring Greatly*, author Brené Brown explains it perfectly:

> The research has made this clear: Vulnerability is at the heart of the feedback process. This is true whether we give, receive, or solicit feedback. And vulnerability doesn't go away even if we're trained and experienced in offering and getting feedback.

> Experience does, however, give us the advantage of knowing that we can survive the exposure and uncertainty, and that it's worth the risk.

Brené Brown  
*Author of Daring Greatly*
Here are a few tips to make giving negative feedback easier:

1. **Start And End With A Positive**
   
   There’s a lot of research about the “feedback sandwich” and how that doesn’t work because employees hear what they want to hear, but this is slightly different. Suppose you schedule a 30-minute meeting with an employee, start the meeting by highlighting a few good things they’ve done recently, and end the meeting by reminding the employee how valuable they are.

2. **Be Mindful Of The Words You Use**
   
   Make sure the employee understands that any criticism is about the work and not the individual. It’s not “you’re a terrible writer”, it’s “the last article you wrote could have used more editing.”

3. **Be Sensitive**
   
   Your body language and tone of voice affect how the feedback is perceived. Even if you as a manager can handle negative feedback, you should assume that the employee is incredibly sensitive and will be affected by the feedback.
Most of the time, employees are caught off guard with negative feedback and need some time to process. Ultimately, they need help improving. As a manager, you should be ready with very specific recommendations (with examples) for what they can do.

When employees are coached by their manager, they’ll feel supported, which will make them more loyal and as a result will improve retention. Also, the sense of pride that comes from accomplishing a new task or learning a new skill is incredibly rewarding.

If an employee can mentally prepare themselves for the feedback, they’ll be able to handle it much better. That’s why the concept of frequent feedback sessions, like monthly one-on-ones, works so well.
Monthly One-On-Ones

Monthly one-on-ones are a great way to frequently check in with employees to discuss their progress, what could be going better, and give them feedback on their work.

“Generally, people who think one-on-one meetings are a bad idea have been victims of poorly designed one-on-one meetings. The key to a good one-on-one meeting is the understanding that it is the employee’s meeting rather than the manager’s meeting.”

Ben Horowitz
Investor, Blogger, and Author
A big mistake that many managers make when giving feedback is doing all the talking. It's not an opportunity to vent your frustrations. If you can keep in mind that it's the employee's meeting, it will be a much more productive and effective session.

You should even have the employee prepare an agenda of what they'd like to discuss during the meeting. This has two benefits:

• It psychologically prepares them
• It sets a clear agenda

Then, you can use some time to ask the employee questions of your own. Here is how I would run a one-hour meeting:

• 10-minutes: Informal catch up
• 20-minutes: Employee's agenda items
• 20-minutes: Manager's notes and questions
• 10-minutes: Action plan and next steps
10-Minute Informal Catch-Up

This is a great way to start a feedback session because it lightens the mood. It’s likely that an employee is nervous stepping into your office, not knowing what to expect.

Starting with an informal “how was your weekend?” or “when we last spoke, you mentioned you were starting guitar lessons, how’s that going?” not only lightens the mood, but shows the employee that you genuinely care about them as a person, and not as a “resource.”

20-Minute Employee’s Agenda Items

Remember, this is the employee’s meeting, not yours. It’s important that you keep this in mind and let employees use this opportunity to get anything that might be bothering them off their chest.

Even the fact that it’s called a one-on-one is important. If you called it a “check-in” then employees would show up expecting to provide a quick status update on their work. That’s not what this is.

It’s a one-on-one, a private discussion between two people where employees should feel free to be as open as possible.
20-Minute Manager’s Notes

Once the employee has gotten everything off their chest, and you’ve addressed their concerns properly, it’s your turn to ask the employee questions and give them feedback about their work.

Here are a few good questions you can ask:

• Are there any projects you’d really like to work on?
• Is any part of your current project unclear or confusing?
• Do you feel like you’re making progress on your goals? Why or why not?
• How could we change our team meetings to be more effective?
• Which company values do you like the most? Which the least? Why?
• Do you feel you’re getting enough feedback?
10-Minute Action Plan and Next Steps

This is probably the most important part of the one-on-one because it shows commitment and accountability. The one-on-one is useless without this step.

These are the two questions you should be asking at the end of the meeting:

1. What can I hold you accountable for the next time we talk?
2. What can I be accountable to you for the next time we talk?

Make sure to write the action plan down!

Equally important is what “writing it down” symbolizes... the act implies a commitment, like a handshake, that something will be done.

Andy Grove
former CEO at Intel
Here are a few important rules to keep in mind with one-on-ones:

1. **Schedule A Recurring Event**
   To have that type of structure is important both to the feedback process and to show the employee that you take their concerns seriously.

2. **Never Miss One**
   They are so valuable and important that you should not miss one if you have a very good excuse to.

3. **Write Everything Down**
   Take notes as the employee is talking, as the employee answers your questions, and as you discuss an action plan.

4. **Send A Follow-Up Email Soon After**
   A good practice is to send a recap email to the employee (another reason taking notes is so important).
Employees are sensitive and vulnerable to feedback. They take their work very seriously and only want to impress their managers.

The way they will grow and improve is through your feedback and coaching.

You need to be there for them and offer support on a regular basis. You can’t expect employees to thrive in an environment where they’re only being checked in on once in a while.

It will likely require additional training for managers, especially in the development of emotional skills.

It also means that managers will have to adjust their schedules to make more time for frequent feedback sessions, but it will be worth it.
Frequent feedback has unexpected benefits too. In the interview referenced earlier with Donna Morris, there was one part that particularly stood out:

“More frequent talks between managers and underperforming staffers have led to a marked increase in involuntary, non-regrettable attrition, because team leaders are no longer putting off having tough conversations with people who aren’t cutting it. It’s not just about retaining talent. It’s about retaining the right talent.

Donna Morris
SVP of People at Adobe

It’s worth it in the end. Your employees will thank you, your company will thank you, and your business will thrive.”
Learn How To Measure & Improve Employee Engagement

A 15-minute presentation on the importance of employee engagement, how to measure it and how you can easily improve it.

Go To Webinar
DISCOVER THE GLOBAL & REAL-TIME
STATE of
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

A real-time report on the state of 10 metrics of employee engagement, including recognition.

See The Live Report