PEOPLE SCIENCE

The art of managing others for R&D Scientists & those who work with them

GIVING *ACTIONABLE* FEEDBACK, PART 1

How many times have you said to one of your employees "Good job!" and wondered why that same employee doesn't always deliver a good job every time? Just telling employees they did a good job is not enough. Knowing how to give feedback that *sustains* performance improvement is essential to your success as a scientist manager. I call this *actionable feedback.*

Scientist managers are not always adept with "people issues" or knowing what to say and what not to say concerning job performance situations. Managers who are scientists may believe:

- Good employees know they are doing a good job, they don't need to be told
- Poor employees don't care and won't change
- Giving feedback takes too much time
- Giving feedback can hurt feelings
- Giving feedback can wait until performance review
- I don't know how to give feedback

From an organizational perspective there are two types of feedback: *formal and informal.* Formal feedback is periodic, typically annually or semi-annually. Formal feedback follows a specific process used throughout the organization. Formal feedback offers few challenges for managers since it is a structured process. Giving formal feedback is tedious if you manage a large group but easier than giving informal feedback.

Informal feedback is talking to an employee about their performance more frequently than scheduled formal feedback (for some employees this could be weekly, for others, less often). These feedback conversations isolate small but manageable performance or behavior changes you and/or others observe. To make these informal feedback conversations more effective and efficient, scientist managers must be skillful in giving actionable informal feedback.

Here's an example of informal feedback that's *not* actionable. "John, I heard you had a great team meeting last month. Keep up the good work." Giving this kind of informal feedback takes little time, makes others feel good, *but has no long term impact on John's continuing success as a team leader*.

Looking at John, you can see how pleased he is to get his manager's recognition. John may be one of many employees who are externally motivated, i.e. needing and wanting praise from others. But there is a problem!

If asked, John has little idea about how to make his team meetings successful in the future. As a result, your job as scientist manager becomes frustrating, remembering to tell John he did a good job again and again. It's hit or miss whether John will know why you praised him in the first place.

Let's take the same situation only now try *actionable feedback.* "John, yesterday I heard from several of your team members about your team meeting. They said the meeting started and stopped on time, the agenda was followed and everyone who had an opinion was listened to. This is the way I hope all team leaders run their meetings." Now John is more likely to know what he can/will do for the next team meeting to get a similar reaction from you.

Sounds like it took some thought and planning before talking to John. You're right. Giving actionable feedback should also follow these steps:

- Give informal actionable feedback as close to the time as the manager is aware as possible. Think in terms of giving JIT (just in time) feedback.
- Credible actionable feedback depends on specificity. What exactly do you want more of or less of from this employee?
- Be prepared with current examples and accurate data focusing on what needs to be continued or changed.

Consider these *benefits* for giving actionable feedback:

- get consistent performance from those you manage, making you more effective and more efficient
- have more time to do what you love: research
- retain your talented employees
- reduce turnover and retraining
- improve employee morale

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