

Positive Feedback: What Employees Want and Need

By Holly Green



Have you recently told an employee what a great job he/she is doing? Positive feedback has long been recognized as a critical element in high-performing workplaces. Yet, many managers don't feel comfortable giving praise, saying that it takes too much time, feels insincere or "too soft", or just gets in the way of day-to-day activities. On the contrary, few actions will do more to build trust and boost morale than ongoing, sincere feedback of a positive nature.

Humans have an innate need to seek feedback on how we are doing. Without feedback, we tend to make up information--almost always negative--to fill the void. Giving positive feedback prevents destructive "information gaps," and strengthens relationships between employees and their supervisors. It also leads to improved work quality, increased accountability and a higher-performing work environment.

Know when and how to compliment

Positive feedback starts with knowing when and how to praise employees. Specifically, it involves recognizing and praising employees for specific behaviors and accomplishments that go beyond the everyday expectations of their jobs.

For example, praise employees when they:

- Turn a difficult customer into a promoter
- Develop or contribute significantly to another colleague's project
- Create a new process, product or approach
- Present an idea for doing something differently (even if the idea is not implemented)

- Do an exceptional job of influencing internally or externally
- Excel at a presentation
- Participate significantly in a community event on behalf of the company

Let employees know that you're paying attention and that you appreciate their efforts. Taking a few moments to express your appreciation can have a powerful impact on employees' self-esteem and their attitudes toward their work and the organization as a whole.

To maximize the effect, make your positive impact:

- **Immediate.** Give recognition as soon as possible after the event.
- **Specific.** State specifically what the person did that met or exceeded your expectations.

- **Impactful.** Explain how the event or behavior affected you, the team or the organization.
- **Encouraging.** Focus on the positive only. Be appreciative without mentioning other things that might need to change or be adjusted. These should be saved for times when you are giving constructive feedback.
- **Focused.** State how the performance or action was positive and contributed to success. This will help prevent other messages, often made up, from taking the employee off track.

Don't praise employees for showing up on time or doing the basics of their job.

Never give positive feedback unless you mean it. Insincere positive feedback will just make recipients wonder what your real agenda is or what you are trying to hide. And the next time you give legitimate praise it will have far less impact.

Positive feedback with Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y

The time has come to jettison the "sandwich" technique, whereby you say something positive, sneak in something you want the employee to do differently, and then finish with a positive. For years, this approach was used to soften the impact of critical feedback, and it worked reasonably well with Baby Boomer and Traditionalist workers.

Gen-Xers, however, quickly see through this strategy and openly question the hidden agenda behind the positive feedback. And the youngest generation, the Millennials (Gen-Y), are so accustomed to direct (and often brutal) feedback that they see no point in trying to sneak positive feedback into a constructive feedback conversation.

So keep your positive feedback positive, focus on specific events and behaviors that exceed your expectations, and let employees know

how much you appreciate their efforts. You'll improve morale and enhance trust while encouraging higher levels of performance. And today's stressed-out employees will appreciate your efforts to meet their workplace needs.

About the Author

As CEO and Managing Director of The Human Factor, Inc. (www.TheHumanFactor.biz),

Holly helps business leaders and their companies achieve higher levels of performance and profitability.

An experienced business leader and behavioral scientist, Holly has a rare combination of extensive academic training and in-the-trenches experience working in and leading organizations. Holly's top selling book, More Than a Minute: How to be an Effective Leader & Manager in Today's Changing World (printed in nine languages and distributed globally) goes beyond the theory of leading and managing by providing practical, action-oriented information.

