We’re Missing the Boat on Feedback: Here’s why
by CEO Elaine Pulakos, PhD

Over the past five years, companies have made significant investments to gain more value from performance management (PM) by streamlining formal systems, adding check-ins to increase feedback, and driving more flexible goals. These changes have increased satisfaction with PM, especially when they come with reduced administrative burden. But one goal has remained elusive. Heads of PM continue to report significant gaps in managers’ ability to have effective feedback conversations that impact performance. So, what’s missing?

In short, traditional approaches to feedback were designed for work environments of the past, and they are not well fit for the work contexts that exist today. Organizations are undergoing tremendous change. ARA – Adaptability, Resilience, and Agility is essential for organizational survival. Products and services are increasingly delivered through cross-functional teams rather than across functional silos. Managers face more demands due to flatter organizations, increasing pressure to do more with less, and heavy collaboration requirements across functions and teams – all of which leave them with less time and opportunity to observe and manage performance. Check-in meetings with direct reports help but these don’t provide a full view of an employee’s work behavior, challenges, or how they are interacting with others to get work done. As a result, managers have less insight to provide confident, credible, and timely feedback.

Incomplete information intensifies our natural tendency to avoid feedback, due to fear of negative reactions. At its core, feedback involves one person judging another, which is usually uncomfortable
for both. Training has focused on telling managers – in so many words – to just get over their fear of giving feedback, but there are good reasons for it. Neuroscience research has shown that feedback triggers automatic defensive reactions, reinforcing the idea that feedback is threatening and often does not go well.

Yet, we continue to train managers to jump quickly to “feedback” as the solution to performance problems, and we focus them on identifying competency and behavioral gaps that each individual needs to address. This focus on individual competencies, coupled with incomplete information, can lead to naïve feedback that lacks insight into the root causes of performance problems and overlooks situational factors. When individuals receive feedback that misattributes performance misses to their personal competency gaps that is, in fact, due to team or environmental issues, it’s not surprising they would react defensively, and rightly so.

In today’s complex work environments, performance issues can stem from poor team processes, context factors, lack of understanding, insufficient resources, or some combination thereof. Before jumping to feedback, managers need to fully diagnose performance issues. Yet, most feedback training focuses on how to deliver feedback messages and typically does not go deep into how to unpack performance problems to ensure feedback is on-point for the situation.

*How traditional feedback can cause more harm than good:*

Most PM training also glosses over how to address performance issues. Guiding employees in changing hard-wired behaviors or working around characteristics that may be embedded in their DNA requires significant attention and effort. Team performance issues can be especially challenging for managers, because they are rarely trained in the dynamics of teamwork, the unique challenges teams face, or how to handle these. Complexity increases further when performance issues are multifaceted – stemming from a combination of individual, team, or environmental causes that need to be isolated to be addressed but managed holistically to yield positive performance outcomes.
Reinventing Feedback for the New Work Environment

With work increasingly delivered by collaborating with others in complex, changing environments, we need to evolve how we think about feedback. We need to go beyond an almost exclusive focus on individual competencies and behavior to diagnosing situations, unpacking root causes, and solving multifaceted performance problems. We need to shift our mindset from feedback is “bad” because it conjures up fear and defensiveness to feedback is “good” because it increases understanding and enables better performance. When we stand up cross-functional teams, for example, members are often new to each other’s language, methods, and processes, and they come with different expectations and norms. Asking questions, sharing different views, and giving timely feedback to each other across the team is critical to increasing situational awareness and surfacing disconnects that can otherwise derail performance.

Strong leadership is needed to set the course for teams, clarify roles and responsibilities, and help create coordinated, seamless performance. Without this, teams can flounder. Different functions end up talking past each other and working in silos, which can result in delivery failures, finger-pointing, and power struggles. Leaders need to model a problem-solving approach to performance challenges that includes problem diagnosis, team input and engagement, and real time communication and “feedback.”

A new mindset for feedback in today’s work environment:

The “5 Whys” – part of Six Sigma methodology – helps diagnose performance issues. It involves asking “why?” something happened, and then using the answer to ask “why” again, until root causes are surfaced. “5” refers to the approximate number of “why” questions that are typically needed to get to root cause. Here’s an example – a customer complains that a report was delivered with errors.

The surface problem is a poor quality deliverable, but addressing this requires unpacking layers of root causes. Applying the “5 Whys,” the reason this happened is that Mary missed errors in the QA
process. We might normally jump to giving Mary feedback about her poor quality work. But asking “why” reveals that Mary received the report from Joe 15 minutes before a hard deadline, even though the team’s process allows 5 hours for QA. Asking “why” Joe was late reveals that he had to research a regulation change. Additional questioning results in different actions than if feedback had stopped with Mary: (1) inform customers of delays while the team incorporates the new regulation, (2) plan how to enable the team quickly, and (3) extend QA time until the change is embedded.

Addressing performance problems requires postponing judgment until sufficient information is gathered to draw conclusions. If multiple root causes are identified, each needs to be examined separately. There are no rules about what questions to ask or how long to continue, and success depends on the knowledge and persistence of those involved. Asking different team members for their perceptions of “why” helps surface disconnects in views of the same situation.

Addressing ineffective team performance begins with increasing awareness. It’s important for leaders to connect consequences of poor performance to strategic imperatives, competitive threats, or team member interests to drive attention and urgency. Team members need to understand the issues and reflect on how they may be contributing to problems and what they can do differently to resolve them. It is helpful for leaders to connect 1:1 with team members to assess each person’s support and commitment to addressing performance issues, as different team members have different views of root cause and urgency. As steps are taken to improve performance, leaders need to monitor progress, reinforce expectations, and course correct until issues are resolved. Leaders may need to bring the team along, using discussion, exercises, coaching, and feedback to work through challenging problems.

Driving a team-oriented mindset helps address performance issues. This means helping the team understand the importance of delivering effectively together, in spite of the fact that each person brings their own unique views, idiosyncrasies, and flaws to the team. Success requires breaking down barriers, understanding each other, and accommodating others’ views and needs. Performance is facilitated when the team climate is characterized by trust, respect, and camaraderie.

An important characteristic of a team environment is that peers often have more first-hand information than managers about team members’ performance and root causes. Yet they may be hesitant to raise issues or otherwise act on this information, if they do not feel it is their place to do so. Leaders may need to encourage team members to raise performance issues quickly and directly, take ownership to nip them in the bud, and prevent dysfunctional behavior from becoming
hard-wired. Recipients of peer feedback need to give serious consideration to what others say and control their defensiveness.

With proper enablement and expectations, peers can become comfortable raising performance issues and working together to address them. Expanding our view of feedback from a judgment about another’s behavior or competency to a process of raising, diagnosing, and addressing performance problems will help. Certain types of issues, however, such as those stemming from interpersonal or political factors, can be difficult for peers to address. Thus, at the same time that managers are empowering their teams to solve performance problems, they also need to provide a path for team members to raise issues safely outside of team channels.

What We Need to Do Differently

Leaders play a critical role in orchestrating and enabling individual and team performance ... both are important and we need to understand the differences. Our talent management practices today focus almost exclusively on individual performance. These need to be evolved to incorporate different practices that are vitally important for driving collaborative performance across individuals. Creating a new mindset for feedback that is fit for today’s work environment is essential. We need to:

- Frame feedback as a valuable activity that increases awareness and performance, instead of something that gives rise to defensiveness and fear.
- Move away from managers providing formal feedback a few times a year to everyone providing informal feedback as needed on a daily basis and in real time.
- Expand our focus beyond individual competencies and behavior to framing feedback as a process of diagnosing and solving multifaceted performance problems.

Leaders need to be upskilled on how to lead their teams in surfacing root causes that can stem from situational, team, or individual factors and developing multi-pronged solutions to performance problems. All team members – not just managers – need to engage in performance-enhancing behaviors (i.e., set clear expectations for each other, raise issues in a timely manner, and break down performance barriers to help each other succeed). These behaviors need to form the core of how work gets done every day by all team members, and not sit outside work in formal PM processes that occur only once or twice a year.

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