



# Performance Feedback: What, Why, Who, When, and How

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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# Performance Feedback: What, Why, Who, When, and How

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## LEARNING OUTCOMES

After taking this course, the student will:

1. Be able to compare and contrast an objective feedback evaluation with a subjective one.
2. Be able to compare and contrast a feedback session with a performance evaluation.
3. Be able to list three reasons for giving feedback about performance
4. Be able to list four elements necessary to make a new task assignment worth assigning
5. Be able to determine whether an activity is productive or simply busy
6. Be able to use a flow chart to determine the cause of a performance problem

## PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK: WHAT

One of the American Heritage Dictionary<sup>1</sup> definitions of feedback is, "*The return of information about the result of a process or activity; an evaluative response [emphasis by author]. The teacher asked the students for feedback on the new curriculum.*"

It can be the roar of approval of the crowd when the home team scores or the shower of debris when they fumble again for the third time. For our purposes in this course, it is all about a reaction to someone else's behavior in the workplace.

The key passage in the definition is AN EVALUATIVE RESPONSE. Also, it is important to realize that the feedback isn't always verbal. Many times, the non-verbal communication of a look or gesture speaks volumes about the observer's internal evaluation of the recent behavior.



Feedback is more about a single recent behavior and reinforcing or correcting it going forward. You do it as many times as are needed and not every employee may need it. Performance evaluations, however, are of a greater scope looking back over the past year or more and setting a series of goals for the future. Every employee gets (or should) a performance evaluation.

Also, it is critical for the learning outcomes of this course to break down the word "evaluative" a little farther by specifying an objective evaluation: we DO NOT mean a subjective evaluation. Here is how we will use the terms objective and subjective in this course:

**Objective** - describing the behavior by using specific data, measurables, objects or actions that are observed and not subject to argument. "The man in the picture above has his hands on his face, his eyes open, and is not smiling" is an objective observation because we can see clearly those conditions are true. Whether we like each other or have never agreed on anything in the past does not matter: it would be virtually impossible to disagree about that objective observation: i.e., facts.

**Subjective** - describing the behavior by using our interpretation of specific data, measurables, objects or actions that are observed. "The man in the picture above must be sad because he has his hands on his face, his eyes open, and is not smiling".

Here, we can argue all day whether he is sad, depressed, daydreaming, or was up all night with a sick child (all subjective evaluations) but we will agree quickly that he has his hands on his face, his eyes open,

and is not smiling - **the objective behaviors**. If you focus on objective feedback based on conditions that are in front of you and the subject, you will be more successful in achieving the purpose of giving that evaluation. If you allow yourself to wander into the subjective arena by guessing at the underlying reasons for the observed behavior, you're setting yourself up for problems.

## PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK: WHO

In the workplace, you can give feedback upward to your superiors, laterally to those with whom you work, or downward to those reporting to you. At home, you may give feedback to a spouse, parents, children, neighbors, and anyone else with whom you may interact.

Although there are many opportunities and situations for feedback, the good news is that the principles for good feedback are constant for all situations.

## PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK: WHY

The universal reasons why we give feedback are we want someone to:

- Start doing something that is desirable
- Stop doing something that is not desirable
- Continue doing something that is desirable

Let's explore each of these topics a little more.

## START DOING SOMETHING...

In all honesty, if we include "start doing something" as one of the reasons for giving feedback, and we previously defined feedback as, "The return of information about the result of a process or activity", a literal person may ask, "How can you return information about the result of a process or activity that has not started yet?" And they would be right.

We're talking about a task or behavior that was overlooked earlier when the duties in question were assigned. Maybe the omitted piece was not relevant at the time or simply did not exist. In either case, we must consider it now and so we must structure our feedback discussion to include it.

Before we simply say, "*Be sure to add this new task we overlooked earlier to the great job you are already doing,*" it is useful to talk about the nature of any tasks we may assign. *If we cannot associate objective - not subjective - requirements to the new task, we risk setting our employee up for performance failure.* Their failure to perform satisfactorily can be directly traceable back to our inability to define expectations clearly.

A new task assignment requires at least these elements for it to be worthwhile assigning:

**Realistic** (*in the mind of the person doing the work*) – The person must feel they have some chance of success or they will not bother trying. ["**This will be a new use for that machine you have been using so successfully.**"]



**Quantifiable** – It must tell the person **HOW MUCH (Quantity)**, **HOW WELL (Quality)**, and **BY WHEN (Time)**. This knowledge helps them gauge their own progress toward the ultimate goal.



We will abbreviate this to "QQT" in this course. ["**We will need you to create six (quantity) new units, with zero defects (quality) by Friday at 4:00PM (time)**"]

**Job Related** – He/she must understand how this fits in with his understanding of what he is paid to do. ["**These new units will help us expand our market and help you increase your range of job skills.**"]

**Doable** – They must involve his/her *doing something* that they can observe and measure. A goal that calls for "*Understanding how work flows through the Highway Department*" is useless because you cannot see them do **UNDERSTANDING**. It only becomes useful if he/she must **do something** that demonstrates his/her understanding such as, "*explain in writing* the complete workflow of a request from a citizen for a safety sign on his street until it is installed."



[The assignment is entirely doable because he is producing tangible outcomes. We can count the units, inspect them for quality, and look at the clock on the wall to see if he's finished by 4:00PM.]

We can take this a little farther and ask, "Do you think a person can be very busy but not very productive?" How could this happen?

It can happen because **activity is not always productivity**. Unless you define the **QQT** aspects of a desired task, you risk having an employee who is just busy. When you focus a task with the three critical performance standards that define "how much," "how well" and "by when" you establish goals and become productive.

Think about a laser. A laser has all the energy of the sun, but it is focused on a single point. However, the laser has all the energy of the sun, but it is focused on a single point. How could you compare parallel energy to a laser?

When do you have a "light bulb" idea? A light bulb or a narrowly-focused idea is a "light bulb" idea. How do you make it more productive and your work more productive?

How can you use a "light bulb" idea? Why would you want to do that?

Could an employee be given specific requirements of the task? How do you give specific directions like one of the following?

- "Make it timely" (How do you do that using QQT criteria?)
- "Make it timely" (How do you do that using QQT criteria?)
- "You've got to be a better team player" (How do you do that using QQT criteria?)
- "You have got to work 'smarter'" (How do you do that using QQT criteria?)

And if the directions they received aren't specific, how can they possibly fulfill your expectations?