

# A Useful Guide to Feedback



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 **Pansophix**

# A Useful Guide to Feedback

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## 1. Introduction

### Who should use this Useful Guide?

This Useful Guide is for anyone who interacts with colleagues at any level. Its objective is to help you to improve the performance and motivation of people you work with. They may or may not report to you; the principles are the same. Morale and motivation can be the difference between success and failure of a whole organisation.

You may also find it helpful in your dealings with people outside work!

It provides step by step guidance to straightforward things you can do. It will not baffle you with science.

You will probably need some of the lessons much less than others. Even so, please skim them anyway; you never know what you may find!

### Benefits of using this Useful Guide

This Useful Guide will help you to ...

- Understand the purpose and value of feedback.
- Differentiate between useful feedback and hurtful criticism.
- Raise your self-awareness by encouraging feedback on yourself.
- Use feedback to motivate others.
- Give useful feedback.
- Decide when not to give feedback.
- Learn from others.

### Points for Action

This book provides suggested Action Points. I strongly recommend that you take the suggested actions – unless of course you already have!

## 2. What is feedback, and what is not

Almost everyone at work does hundreds of things that affect the work or morale of colleagues and we in turn are affected by what others do and say to us. In a perfect world, everything we all do and say would of course be perfect. In reality, it may not be. Being imperfect is human and probably not a problem if we are aware of our imperfections and are doing something to improve them, or at least in the short term, ensuring no damage is done by them.

The problem that arises if we are unaware of our strengths and shortcomings is that our output is a mixture of everything from wonderful to unsatisfactory. To continually improve we need feedback!

I remember reading somewhere that a large survey of people at work reported that 80% of workers said that their bosses did not provide 'appropriate' feedback. Reading between the lines, I suspect the emphasis was on the word 'appropriate', hence the production of this Useful Guide!

I once worked for a really good boss who was based 50 miles away. There was enough data being gathered and sent around the organisation that he could watch the important figures without leaving his desk. He told me that he would not be in day to day contact unless he felt something was amiss. I am sure that this was well meant and at first I enjoyed being left alone. After a while, however, I began to wonder if silence really meant perfection and one day I had a message that the boss had called and would I call him back. As I pressed the call button on the phone, I knew that I was about to receive bad news! Imagine a world where the only time your boss calls you is to deliver bad news. Even worse imagine your feelings when your boss is seen approaching in person.

I must repeat that this boss was a really good person who thought leaving me alone was a good thing. Looking back, I was equally at fault for not making my feelings clear at the time.

The point of recounting this story is to illustrate that we all need feedback whether it's good, bad or indifferent. No feedback at all can be almost as bad as badly delivered feedback.

The comments, sometimes quite casual, that we make, or forget to make, about the work of colleagues or friends, can be wonderfully motivating or totally demoralising. I believe that the output of a dedicated and motivated colleague can be much, much greater than that of somebody lacking those feelings. The way we give or fail to give feedback has a very large influence. Our good intentions count for very little in all this. If it seems to the colleague that we are

being unfair, ungrateful etc, the damage is done. Even if they have completely misunderstood our meaning, it is their perception of it that will govern their feelings and future actions.

Before we investigate further, we need to agree what we mean by certain words in this context. Lots of us refer to 'constructive criticism' or just 'criticism' rather than feedback. Have you ever heard anyone justify some quite unhelpful or even hurtful criticism by saying it was 'constructive'? Maybe it was meant to be but.....?

The purpose and value of feedback is to keep us exactly 'on track'. This means that we need to be told when what we are doing is 'just right' and equally when things should (not could) be even better. For the sake of clarity in this Useful Guide I intend to refer to '**reinforcing** or **redirecting** feedback' instead of criticism; constructive or otherwise. Here are a few examples of what I believe are the differences between the meanings of the words feedback and criticism as they are generally used.

<b>Feedback</b>	<b>Criticism</b>
Seeks solutions	Seeks to apportion blame
Forward looking	Dwells in the past
Is objective	Is subjective
Is tough on problems	Is tough on people

So, feedback is about getting the job done, really well, every time. Anything that doesn't achieve this is what most would call criticism and is often unhelpful. Criticism is sometimes just an ego trip for the critic or a subtle kind of bullying.

A culture that encourages proper feedback will have a great advantage over one that fosters criticism and blame. Your people will learn more quickly, be more creative, productive and happier.

### **Point for Action**

Provide regular, proper feedback to everyone who affects you.

### 3. Seeking feedback

Before we get into how to give feedback, can we think for a moment about our own needs? It is so easy for us to accidentally insulate ourselves from the feedback we need.

A well known provider of car insurance wrote to me recently to remind me that my policy was soon to expire and that they still had all my details from the previous year when I had requested a quote from them. They said that if nothing had changed, they could provide a new quote immediately if I quoted the reference number on their letter. I called them and was quite surprised when the agent started to ask all the questions from scratch. I tried to explain that they already had the details and about my reference number but the agent just kept saying that he had to do it this way. I felt let down but in a charitable moment asked if I could provide some helpful feedback on their marketing. I really meant to be helpful. The agent just kept repeating that he had to do it this way. Feeling less charitable by the minute, I asked to speak to the supervisor. When I was eventually allowed to, I started by saying that I wanted to be helpful. Before I had a chance to offer my feedback, the supervisor told me – you guessed – we have to do it this way. I don't know if they ever learned how many potential customers they were losing and quite frankly, I will never bother them again.

Most people work hard and take pride in what they do. Imagine for a moment that a colleague has started giving you feedback to the effect that your last piece of work was less than 100%. Pause and think how you would feel. Many of us instinctively become defensive even though we realise that the feedback may be helpful. The problem is that whatever we say, our tone of voice and body language can give away our defensive feelings and make it difficult for the person trying to offer feedback. It might have taken a lot of courage for the other person to offer the feedback and, if we make it difficult for them, they are less likely to bother next time. We will learn nothing from them. If the person is senior to you, he or she may also decide that it's too much trouble to offer you friendly help and next time your work is not 100% you will hear about it in much more direct terms!

If colleagues are willing to offer you proper redirecting feedback, it probably says two very good things ...

- They want to help you – they are true friends.
- They think you are adult enough to take it.



We must try really hard to appreciate the effort someone is making to help us. We must smile and really listen to what they have to say.

Sometimes, although well intentioned, the feedback might not be helpful. Sometimes it may not even be well intentioned. Either way, we must still accept it graciously, even if we later choose not to act on it. We must not appear ungrateful. Next time, if there is one, they might have a real gold nugget for you!

The best way I know to get over the defensive instinct is to routinely seek feedback. That way, you get used to hearing the occasional bit of 'bad news' and colleagues will become more relaxed and honest with you. They will probably ask you for feedback in return. After a little while, giving each other honest and helpful feedback will become quite natural.

Feedback can go in any direction. If very senior people actively seek feedback from their team members, it will encourage them to do the same. A previous boss of mine was really good at this.

Firstly she made a point of meeting all her people, one to one, every few weeks even (especially?) when we were under pressure. She tried to see us all once a month but in practice would settle for ten times a year. Once, during a very busy time I had not been near the office for weeks and was staying in various hotels around the country. She rang me one day and said, "I see that you are staying in Burton-on-Trent most of next week – what are you doing for dinner on Wednesday?" The following Wednesday she drove from Birmingham to where I was staying, conducted a very productive one to one over a curry and drove back.

Secondly, she would always, always ask what if anything she could do (or get done) that would make the job easier/better etc. She was looking for feedback on how she managed us and appeared to genuinely appreciate our comments. It is only fair to point out that she did not act on everything we said! It may not come as a surprise to hear that she ran the most successful region of a National organisation and had a totally loyal team.

We don't need to have a direct reporting relationship to seek feedback, although a good working knowledge of each other should help. We've already looked at things which would make it harder for people to give us feedback; there are also ways to make it easier for them.

I remember running a new course, hoping it would be the first of many, for a new client. The training manager told me that the official finish time was 5pm but that I should finish by 4.40pm so he could come along to get some feedback



from the delegates. I finished on time and the training manager arrived. I don't know why but I had expected him to ask me to wait outside which I offered to do. He said something like "of course not, take a seat". He then took a new sheet of flipchart paper, drew a line down the middle and headed the left column 'WWW' and the right column 'EBI'. I was intrigued. It transpired that this was a time honoured way of doing things at this organisation and everybody, except me, knew what the headings meant!

WWW meant 'what went well?' and he started to ask the people, quite informally, what had been useful about the day. To my great relief and delight they produced several quite specific examples of things they would do better from now on.

EBI meant 'even better if' and the training manager said something like "I am hoping to run this course for everyone at your level. You were the guinea pigs, what can we do to make it even better for the all the others?" "Even better!!!" Suddenly I was not dreading 'criticism' but looking forward to hearing ideas that would help me to earn more money!

When I submitted one of my previous Useful Guides to Pansophix, the editor emailed me the words ...

"This is great. Well done for producing a straightforward Useful Guide in the timescales you promised! .....I believe we can make it even greater! Questions and suggestions ....."

My natural human defensive instinct said to me something like "I have slaved hard over this – what does he know about it". It was late in the afternoon when I read the email. I shut the computer down for the day and 'put my feet up'. I awoke early the next day thinking, 'he's right you know!'. The old saying 'sleep on it' springs to mind. I re-read the email and thought hard about the questions and suggestions. A few hours later, Mk2 was ready which I believe will sell more copies than Mk1! I hope my reaction to the feedback will encourage more of the same in future!

### **Point for Action**

Actively seek, encourage and appreciate feedback from everyone your work impacts on.

## 4. Feedback and motivation

Feedback given, or withheld, can have a really significant effect on us and the way we work. This is well illustrated by [Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#) which describes 5 levels of things that almost all of us need.

Level 1 must be satisfied before moving up to level 2, and so on. Although Maslow's work is over 50 years old, I think it's as relevant now as ever, maybe more so.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Level ...

1. **Physiological** - air, food, water, sleep
2. **Safety** – a feeling of security/shelter, somewhere to live. Nowadays this often equates to having a job
3. **Social** – being part of a social group, which may involve work colleagues, engaging in social activities,
4. **Esteem** - self esteem and the respect of others.
5. **Self actualization** – Reaching the top of the particular tree that you want to be top of. To realise your full potential.

For people to do a good job for you, and hopefully enjoy it, I reckon they need to be at least level 4 – have self esteem and the respect of others. Some people are more self motivated than others, but for most of us, our self esteem will be affected, for better or worse, by the feedback and recognition we get, or don't get, from others.

If a person perceives from feedback, or absence of it, that they or their work is not valued, they may well drop to level 3 or even 2. The perception can be correct or not, the effect is the same. What chance do we have of getting the best out of someone whose main pre-occupation is worrying about defaulting on their mortgage payments/rent? Many years ago, I had a boss who said that people's personal problems were not his, and that they (the personal problems) should be hung in the locker room along with their coats when they came to work.

Wouldn't that be good?

Fortunately, Abraham Maslow reminds us that our people will not reach level 4 on his scale, which we need to get the best out of our people, if they are worrying all day about where their next month's rent, mortgage repayment, groceries, school dinner money etc. etc. etc. will come from.

Our job is to get the best out of our people, so whilst we cannot guarantee a 'job for life', the way we give feedback is extremely important.

Self esteem comes largely from ...

- Job satisfaction/achievement of something good
- Recognition for a job well done
- Respect from colleagues/boss/customers

Much of this comes from feedback.

I remember a 'Peanuts' cartoon strip in a national newspaper which said:

"Doing a good job here is like wetting yourself in a dark suit – it gives you a warm feeling – but nobody notices – and it soon goes away".

Proper feedback is vital to the success of your organisation.

The next two sections may help you to give useful, motivational feedback

### **Point for Action**

Think of some examples of feedback you have received that have motivated or de-motivated you. Reflect on how you can copy the good examples and avoid the bad ones

## 5. Who needs feedback and how often?

Great, outstanding deeds that 'save the day' are very likely to attract wonderful feedback in glowing terms, and so they should. Some jobs or departments that are in the public eye are more likely to be in the spotlight than others.

For instance, I went to a concert recently where the performers were duly paraded at the end for a well earned ovation. They were very good, so I suppose they receive similar accolades every day of the week. Audiences, ever keen to show their appreciation, more often than not, feel the need to stand or throw flowers. It must only be a matter of time before we have to stand on the seats and throw lumps of gold, and then what? Have you ever wondered if the performers are now so immune to all this feedback that they would rather get off the stage and put their feet up with a cup of tea?

Consider then the small army of unseen people that wait patiently to do their part behind the scenes in the small hours. For example, production, transport, wardrobe, sound, lighting, cleaning, caterers etc. etc. etc. Without them, the show could not go on but I wonder when and how often they get their 'pat on the back'. I don't know anything about theatre but I suspect that many of the stars would be happy to share some of the applause with the 'crew', who would appreciate it.

The same is true for people making major blunders. The real big ones attract immediate feedback more than the long series of minor ones. As we know, there are many exceptions to this. Chief executives presiding over catastrophic failure are nowadays quite likely to be given early retirement with enough cash to live in luxury.

### Points for Action

- Make sure that everyone gets the feedback they deserve, reinforcing and/or redirecting at appropriate intervals
- Review how you distribute feedback to all – stars and unsung heroes

## 6. Feedback on good work – reinforcing feedback

The purpose of reinforcing feedback is to ensure the person knows they have done exactly what you wanted of them and you have recognised the fact. It also tells the person that repeating this behaviour will be appreciated.

Giving feedback on good work is relatively easy but often not done, or not done well. Some bosses take the view that their people are paid to do a good job so giving praise is not necessary. I suppose they have a point but I would ask them ...

- How long they think a person will go on doing a good job without the recognition/feedback they deserve and need?
- Are they sure the individual knows that they are 'doing it right'?

It is easy to overdo reinforcing feedback and individuals' need for it vary a lot. If it is overdone it is devalued and becomes like the music in the lift which people don't hear. It can also appear insincere, or even patronising. Here are a few tips to help achieve the purpose – to reinforce good work and behaviour ...

1. Consider the 'size' of the feedback needed. It may be anything from a simple "thanks – well done" to something quite formal with speeches and awards, or anything in between. The simple "thanks – well done" is often all we need.
2. Think of the individual. You will be aware of who needs what. More confident and experienced people generally feel more secure and don't need as much, although they mostly still appreciate it.
3. If the feedback is on a true team effort, try to give it when they are together. Team meetings are made for this. Be sensitive to an individual in the team who may feel that he or she hasn't contributed his or her share on this occasion.
4. Most individuals also like to be praised in public (although they may protest at the time). Team meetings are also ideal for this. It is important to recognise 'back office' people as well as those 'in the limelight'. If you do single out individuals for praise at team meetings, make sure that everyone deserving gets a turn. If you have one superstar that would always be singled out they might be delighted to have some of their praise in private and let others share the praise in public.
5. Make sure they know exactly what you are pleased with. Be specific about it and point out the benefits that have accrued from it. This way

they know that you really understand the value of their contribution and are not just 'being nice'.

6. Most reinforcing feedback tends to be verbal and often spontaneous, which is great. If the person has done something really special (which might mean doing something quite mundane right first time, every time), you might consider backing it up in writing. Not many people do this which gives it a rarity value as well. I had a good clear out of my desk a while ago and found a note from my boss dating from the 1990s thanking me for my work on a particularly challenging job. I was very pleased with this job and kept the note ever since. I don't remember where I put it but definitely did not throw it away. It will make me smile again on my next big clear out!
7. Keep notes of people's good work and remember it when you do their annual appraisal. It is good to record the achievements that prompted your feedback at this time, not an essay, just the highlights. You may have already given them good feedback, but when you are promoted and move on your successor will benefit from your comments. Most people will really appreciate this.

### **Point for Action**

Make sure people know that you are sincere when giving reinforcing feedback.

## 7. Feedback on unsatisfactory work – redirecting feedback

The purpose of redirecting feedback is to improve/correct the way something will be done in the future and to improve the performance of the receiver. It is not the same as taking somebody through the formal performance management procedure. It is as important as reinforcing feedback but often more difficult to give in a way that people appreciate and will act upon.

It is important to always remember to balance reinforcing and redirecting feedback. I read somewhere that we are many more times as likely to complain as to praise, given equal reasons for each. I believe this is true and not deliberately malicious – it's just the way we are. However, we are paid to get the very best out of our people and this is unlikely if they don't perceive that our feedback is fair and balanced. Here are two examples of completely useless, in fact harmful, feedback.

- I once asked a group of workers how the job was going. They were all happy and could demonstrate to me that they were well on top of the job. I then asked them if their boss was happy with it. They had to think about this one, and after a pause, one of them said that he thought the boss was happy. His colleagues looked mystified. I asked him what made him think this. He replied, quite seriously, "We haven't had a rollocking yet this week". I hope you find this story strange, but there are a lot of people out there who measure their success by the interval between rollockings.
- We had a new director once whom we rarely saw. The only time we could rely on seeing her was when we were struggling to hit a target. On these, thankfully rare, occasions, she would call a meeting and literally wag her finger at us whilst telling us that we must do better and/or try harder. We were a very successful, hard working team and very loyal to our boss, who was obviously embarrassed by his boss's behaviour. The second time this happened I had just returned from a challenging and successful job and was feeling quite pleased with myself. The wagging finger was too much. I asked the director what specific aspect of our work she thought was below standard and how she thought we might improve it. I have never seen anyone so completely lost for words. She didn't understand the difference between redirecting feedback (and leadership) and



pointless moaning. After a little huffing and puffing she fled the scene without offering any direction at all.

I think we can learn a lot from bad as well as good examples but before we get depressed, here are a few tips to help achieve the purpose – to get the job done even better next time and maintain the self esteem of the recipient. Some of these will sound familiar.

1. Make the feedback appropriate to the deed. Very often, a simple friendly word is enough. When people have done a poor job, they usually know before you do and are working hard to put it right. They didn't get up this morning to deliberately do a bad job.
2. You will know how individuals within your team react to redirecting feedback. Remember that your objective is to get the job done better, not to demoralise the person. This does not mean that poor performance should not be corrected.
3. If the performance of a whole team is uncharacteristically poor, it is more likely to be due to some force outside of the team, rather than lots of individual poor performance. Look for something that could have affected all, or even most of them before giving feedback.
4. Giving redirecting feedback to an individual should not be done in public.
5. Make sure they know exactly what you are not satisfied with. Be specific about it and point out the problems it has caused. This way they know that you really understand the situation and are not just 'being picky'.
6. Redirecting feedback is often given verbally, face to face, and forgotten – provided it achieves the improvement required. If, however, the improvement is not forthcoming you will need to keep some notes. Hopefully this does not mean gathering evidence to support their ultimate dismissal (although it might) but it is better to be able to say, "this has happened three times before" than, "you're always doing this". If the shortcoming is a regular occurrence, ask yourself if it might be a training issue.
7. If you find yourself recording unsatisfactory performance at someone's annual appraisal, before looking to the discipline system, ask yourself how effective your redirecting feedback has been through the year. In any case, one of the main foundations of any appraisal system is that there should be no surprises on the day. If the performance is bad enough to be recorded at an appraisal, you should have been working on it since it started.

**Point for Action**

Be very specific about the improvement you need and provide direction on how to achieve it if necessary.

## 8. To feed back or not to feed back?

Individuals are different in so many ways. Diversity experts often refer to age, gender, religion etc to illustrate this and warn us, quite rightly, of the dangers of assuming that a particular group will behave in a particular way. It is very dangerous and unproductive to make assumptions based on stereotypical views of a particular group. For example, one of these assumptions that irritate me personally is that 'older people resist change'. I am sure that some older people do resist change, and I am equally sure that some young people do as well. Acting upon such assumptions is folly. The visible differences between people are the tip of the iceberg.

The differences relevant to this discussion are about the way different people prefer to work on the same task.

When giving feedback, we need to remember that there may be ten different ways of completing a given task and the chances are that your people will try all of them and invent a few more over the course of time. Although there may be reasons why a particular task must be done in a certain way, this is not always the case. There are hundreds of things which don't matter at all how they are done as long as the task is completed to the standard/cost/etc specified. So, please imagine that you notice somebody doing something differently to how you would do it. How might you react? A common reaction would be to 'correct' them and show them our way. Or we could ask ourselves:

- How will they feel about this? Will the improvement (maybe) gained be worth the potential de-motivation caused? Your decision, but please think about it.
- Whether it matters how they do it, as long as the correct result is achieved.
- If the job is completed and cannot be changed, how much does it matter if one tiny part of it was not done as it should have been? If it does not matter, should we point out the error of their ways there and then and rob them of the job satisfaction they have obtained, or do some retraining later to get it done even better next time?
- How will they perceive our well intentioned 'help'? Will they see it as the helpful advice we intend or pointless interference / 'micro management'?
- Is it possible that they have discovered a better way?

**Point for Action**

Consider the relative value of giving redirecting feedback on tiny issues against the value of the motivation of the individual.

## 9. Conclusion

Over the years, we have learned to do so many things that we couldn't do before and also to do other things so much better. Much of this improvement is due to the way we give and receive feedback.

Giving anything perceived as unfair criticism will only encourage people to 'keep their heads down' or look for another job. There are a few old sayings about this. One that I remember goes something like 'there's no point putting yourself out here – you won't be any better thought of than those that don't bother'. This belief would reduce potentially great people to 'jobsworths' who will do the bare minimum to stay 'under the radar' and produce a very mediocre output whilst seeking other employment. Criticism goes with a blame culture. I reckon the surest way to destroy a competitor organisation is to get them to adopt a blame culture and go for criticism rather than proper feedback. This should drop their productivity by around 50% and totally stifle any creativity their people have.

A major national organisation used to run a very good suggestion scheme and one of all the managers' key performance indicators was the number of suggestions per person per year that came from their teams. Managers who knew a bit about giving proper feedback always did well at this whilst the finger wagging kind hardly ever did.

People who feel free to make an honest mistake (within reason!) in the expectation of proper feedback and without fear of ridicule will ...

- Fix it immediately or call for help if they can't
- Be happy to go out of their way to help you
- Get more work done
- Continually improve the process
- Get job satisfaction
- Feel valued
- Be loyal to you
- Be confident to accept delegated tasks so you can go on holiday, relax and enjoy yourself, knowing that your people will hold the fort.

## Feedback

As we are always trying to improve our Useful Guides we would appreciate any feedback you can give us on **A Useful Guide to Feedback**. Please click on the link below to access our online feedback form ...

<http://www.pansophix.com/useful-guide-feedback.html>

If we use your feedback to improve **A Useful Guide to Feedback** we will email you a copy of the updated version.

## Free Tips and Tools

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## About the Author



Bob Shiers, author of this Useful Guide and ...

- [A Useful Guide to Managing People](#)
- [A Useful Guide to Training Needs Analysis](#)

... lives in Suffolk, near to the sea.

He's had 15 years experience in the Food Industry culminating in managing what was then the largest food processing plant in Europe. He maintained good relations with 850 people and excellent returns for the shareholders.

Following this success he spent 14 years with the Industrial Society helping to promote best practice in Leadership and Management. Since then he has worked as a freelance trainer and believes that treating people correctly is essential to the success of any enterprise.

He's a member of the Institute of Leadership and Management.

When he not writing or delivering training he spends time with his family, sails and cooks.