

If Pep Guardiola did feedback...

By Ian Patterson from The Patterson Group

If you were passing your manager's office and they said "do you have a moment, I've got some feedback for you", how would you feel? Not great eh? That's probably because people's experience of feedback is so poor. In many ways it should be a straightforward skill, but clearly from the workshops

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I've run over 25 years, effective feedback is not that common in the workplace.

This point is reinforced by much of the research looking into employee engagement. A survey by the pollsters Gallup shows that employee engagement in the UK has been steadily declining since 2012. The figures suggest that the percentage of British full-time workers who consider themselves to be 'engaged at work' is an alarming 8%. 73% are classed as 'not engaged' and 19% are classed as 'actively disengaged'. Taking a national perspective, this places the UK 9th out of twelve developed countries.¹

1 <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/219947/weak-workplace-cultures-help-explain-productivity-woes.aspx>

Clearly there are a wide range of factors that come into play when we are talking about employee engagement. But you'd have to be pretty brave (and ignore much of the other research) to say that the relationship between employees and their manager isn't near the top of the list of factors that contribute to this. I would argue that ineffective feedback and related skills - such as poor listening and telling rather than asking questions - contributes hugely to the problem.

Now, back to Pep Guardiola. I'll fess up and say I don't know him personally. But as he is probably the best football coach in the world, I'd like to think that fantastic people-management skills are one of the reasons why he is a successful football manager. So where effective feedback is concerned, let me try and think like Pep would and explore what these might look like.

Have a process

Most of you will have heard of the 'feedback sandwich' or 'kiss-kick-kiss' approaches to providing feedback. They are well-known and some aspects - such as providing a balance of good stuff and bad stuff - should feature within effective feedback. That said, surely there must be a better way of providing feedback than these.

What we will agree on is that providing feedback, as a process, can be made more effective if a structure is followed. This can be abridged for simple and straightforward feedback especially where the relationship between the parties is strong. But if the feedback could be sensitive or the relationship isn't strong, then here are the four main stages of providing feedback that I'd like to think that Pep would recommend. It could be used in any people-management scenario but for the examples, I'll work on the basis that this is feedback between a supervisor and adviser after observing a client meeting.

1. **Confirm the purpose of feedback.** At the start of the feedback session, it would be sensible to just check that both people understand the purpose of the meeting and what is expected from each party. This should also include the expected duration of the meeting which is likely to be no more than 5-10 minutes.
Tip: Ask the adviser what they would like to get from the meeting (or what their agenda is). This encourages them to contribute to the agenda and increases their buy-in. Give it a try, you'll be surprised just how shocked they are when asked!
2. **Encourage the individual to self-assess.** This enables the supervisor to establish not only the adviser's recollection of events, but also perhaps some understanding behind the reasons for it. Self-assessment also gives the supervisor

something to build their own feedback on, especially if the adviser recognises some negative points. It is always preferable to build on negative points that have been raised by the individual and to then focus on possible solutions.

Tip: Get the adviser talking first. Ask questions like: “what do you think were your three strengths?” and “if you were to do it again, what would you do differently?”. Don’t be afraid to ask follow-up questions to probe. Remember, this is their time to talk, so listen.

Multiple realities

Often, what is reality is subject to debate as people will view and interpret information in different ways. For example, have you ever left a meeting where some attendees thought it was very useful whilst others thought it was a waste of time?! In other words, don’t just assume that because you saw something, the other person saw it the same way.

By asking the individual to self-appraise prior to providing your own observations, you can establish the individual’s view of the event.

3. **Provide your observations.** In this stage, the supervisor can provide input into the discussion by stating what they observed. If the previous stage has gone well, this might simply be a case of agreeing with relevant areas raised by the adviser and ensuring any outstanding important areas are raised. To be effective, this should be specific and preferably refer to actual quotes or examples from what was observed. It is important to stick to facts and not offer opinions, which may be subjective and open to disagreement.

Tip: Describe what you heard or saw, e.g. “what I heard you say....” or “when you said xyz, I noticed that the client...”. If you describe rather than judge, you can raise even quite sensitive areas without the adviser necessarily becoming defensive.

4. **Plan and agree next steps.** Effective feedback isn’t about just having a nice conversation. The positives need to be reinforced and any development areas need to be worked on. The adviser should be encouraged to identify not only the development areas that need to be addressed as a priority, but also the potential solutions. The agreed action needs to be documented along with the time scale and responsibility for future action agreed.

Tip: This is the point where supervisors often go into ‘tell mode’ because the focus is now on finding appropriate solutions. Don’t, unless the adviser is genuinely struggling to know what to do next. Instead, ask questions like “what do you see as the key priority?” and “what’s the best way to take that forward?”. The adviser will only do any future actions if they buy-in to the process (which is unlikely if they’re told what to do).

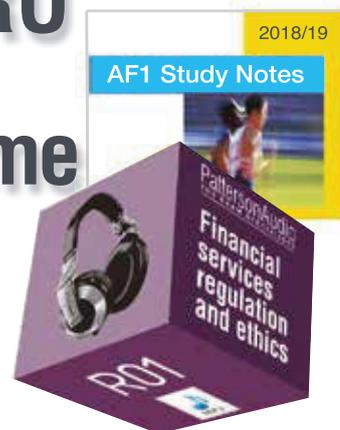
General rules on feedback

Here are 7 quick general tips to make your feedback effective:

- ❑ People are more responsive when they are put at ease. Try and both start and finish feedback on a positive note.
- ❑ Be genuine and sincere. Giving difficult feedback is not easy for most people – acknowledge this and be honest, e.g. “This feels a little awkward....”. If people see you genuinely looking to help, they will be more receptive and it will help to develop trust.
- ❑ Avoid directing the individual if possible - ask them to consider options or alternatives. By doing this, they are more likely to take ownership of the resulting actions. The employee – not the manager – should be talking 70% of the time.
- ❑ Be as positive as possible. Offer justifiable praise but don’t fudge the issue if a problem is identified that needs to be addressed. Be sensitive and focus on the upside of the resultant action.
- ❑ Provide feedback soon after an event so that the detail is fresh in the mind.
- ❑ Avoid being personal or judgmental.
- ❑ Try and identify ‘quick wins’ especially where a change in behaviour may take some time.

Whether you are a line manager of a ‘certification function’, a supervisor of advisers or – like Pep, manage a high-performing team – feedback is just one of those skills that any people-manager needs to get right. Is it the most important people-manager skill? Probably....

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