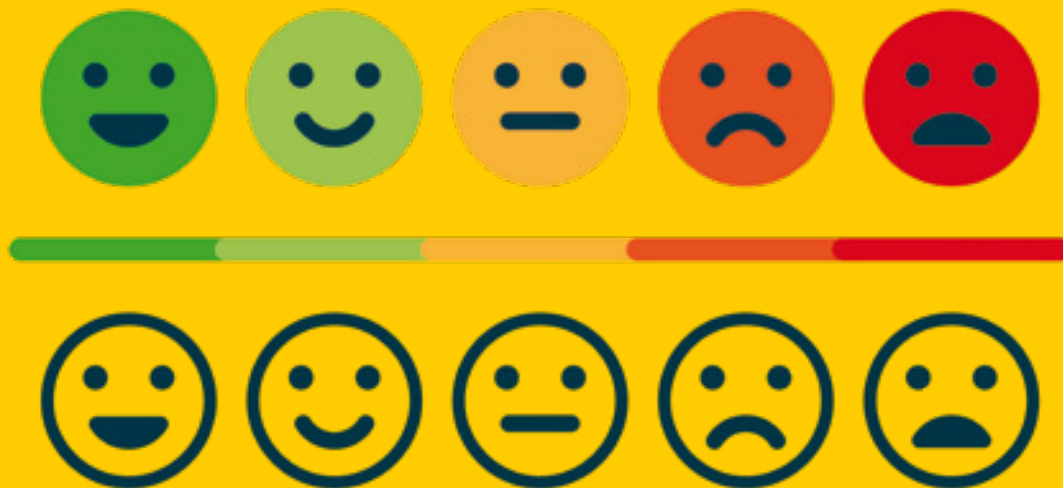


The quest for effective performance management

Edna Diez and **Revathi Raghavan** argue that to work properly performance management needs to shift from being an evaluative tool to one that grows and develops people



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Organisations are constantly in search for that one idea that will solve their ailments. Buzzwords such as agile, feedback culture, team versus individual performance, check-ins and so on take centre stage as the performance process is refreshed.

But one thing is fundamentally clear about why making the performance process meaningful matters. It's because of our people. To deliver on our organisational objectives we need our people to be engaged, focused on the right activities and highly productive. In this article we explore some key concepts that organisations are introducing to shift the focus of performance management to what really matters.

Taking a step back let us acknowledge that there is no system or innovative process that will unilaterally solve performance management. A one-size-fits-all solution does not work, so you need to choose what works best for your organisation.

The focus in our organisations is on revisiting our performance processes and emphasising behaviours and interactions. This means honing in on improving staff behaviours and habits and enabling authentic and intentional feedback within an environment built on trusting relationships between staff and managers. Performance management done well can provide a constant source of feedback to help staff learn and grow.

When we talk about feedback, we are focused on building a *culture* of feedback where we have requestors, givers and receivers. We are moving from incidental to intentional feedback. Feedback should happen organically, and not be forced through checkpoints or timelines. We are emphasising not only giving and receiving feedback, but shifting mindsets to *asking* for feedback.

According to Dr David Rock, Director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, a leading global research organisation, and pioneer in the neuroscience of leadership: “Giving and receiving unsolicited feedback can be a threatening experience due to the high sensitivity of the social brain. That makes it difficult for the receiver to efficiently process feedback and for the giver to share quality feedback. Asking for feedback can lower the threat for the receiver, allowing for greater cognitive capacity to process information...[it] enables neurological processes that accelerate learning”.

This research shows that feedback pull is more effective than feedback push.

Instilling this culture of feedback is a challenge for any organisation. Our own organisations reflect a multitude of nationalities, each exemplifying a deep commitment towards achieving business priorities and organisational goals, and each bringing their diversity of thought, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

Thus, our challenge of building a culture of feedback is compounded by the need to define a common feedback culture that all managers can consistently leverage and all staff can trust.

A behavioural shift, and a key enabler of effective feedback, is investment in the growth mindset, which embraces continuous learning where challenges are seen as opportunities and life and work are “learning rooms” to try new things and continuously improve.

In our organisations, we are placing a greater emphasis on progress and less on perfection. As we all know, performance management, has been all about evaluation. Every year, staff cycle through feeling judged, reviewed, and evaluated – and as a result, threatened by the process and with little if any learning or growth.

Subconsciously, they conclude that perfection is rewarded. We are stressing the importance of measuring progress, leveraged through ongoing interactions between staff and managers. The intent is to become more deliberate towards growth and development and move beyond perfection.

Finally, enabling an impactful feedback culture requires ownership by managers. Managers need to take accountability and create an environment of psychological safety where staff can all trust each other and collectively deliver. Staff should feel free to verbalise their thoughts and take moderate risks without feeling scrutinised.

So how do you build a culture of feedback? It starts with skill-building for feedback givers, seekers, and receivers. Our organisations have invested considerable time and effort in supporting managers on providing constructive, honest, and timely feedback and for staff to actively seek feedback and have the right mindset and attitude for getting the best out of it.

Fortunately, these skills can be built through training, continuous coaching and rewarding the right behaviours. Some key takeaways to get started to build into your training and communications are:



As a feedback provider

- 1. Balance your feedback** so that it addresses appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. Always start with a constructive opening of what is going well. Separate evaluation from appreciation and coaching. It's more than just telling a staff member they are doing a great job or they are good at something. Be specific on what you have observed that is working well. As a manager, continue coaching in the areas where staff have met goal expectations, or not, and discuss where certain behaviours or actions could have been better
- 2. Finally, move to evaluation.** Are they on track to achieving the goal and, if not, what else needs to be done differently? Since you are continuously giving feedback, you can separate the types of feedback provided. It should not all be reserved to quarterly, semi-annual or annual reviews
- 3. Be specific.** Explain what you have observed and what you would like to see. Explain where they are coming from and where they need to go. You are the mirror of that person's behaviour or style. So, give examples of the impact their behaviour has on you, the clients, or peers





As a feedback requestor

1. **Ask explicitly** what you need to build on and where you may need to refocus
2. **Ask broadly** from several colleagues to mitigate unconscious bias in the feedback giver
3. **Ask often.** Frequent feedback helps you iterate and adapt in the face of change

As a feedback receiver

1. **Own your feedback.** Actively seek feedback from your manager, your peers, or clients. Feedback gives you the information you don't know about your own behaviours. Only others can see the impact of what you do. It's through feedback that you can actually hear and see who you are
2. **Act on your feedback.** After you have internalised it. Yes, your first reaction will be to disregard it, the second to analyse it, and then absorb it after you have removed the emotional reaction triggered by the feedback. You'll be able to reflect on the feedback and act on what you would like to do next
3. **Be very clear on what you want from feedback.** Are you seeking:
 - a) appreciation (I've worked so hard for six months and I haven't heard a word from you)
 - b) coaching (I would like to see what else I can do to get unstuck on this goal)
 - c) evaluation (did I meet the results or standards and what else can I do to improve and grow)?

If you are not getting the type of feedback you want, be specific and ask clarifying questions. In a feedback session, do not leave without understanding what is next or what the expected behaviour/interaction looks like.

Most of these concepts may not sound new but our drive is to build new habits and internalise these behaviours. Without question, this will take time. At the core, performance management needs to shift from being an evaluative tool to one that grows and develops people.

Motivating staff today means investing in them and revealing their talents in those areas that energise them. To the organisation, this translates into a better understanding and utilisation of the workforce, thereby increasing staff productivity, innovation, and engagement.

Complacency in the current paradigm will not cut it anymore. It is time to evolve. Feedback, coaching, and openness to staffs' possibilities will move us in the right direction. Is your organisation willing and ready to make a shift?

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About the Authors

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