Giving effective employee feedback

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Providing constructive feedback is an important component to the development of any team, and a workplace where staff are comfortable with giving and receiving feedback will help build employee morale and enhance skills. Sarah Hibbert describes the importance of feedback, how to avoid some common communication stumbling blocks and how to implement a culture of communication in a business.

WE are all taught from an early age to give feedback – please and thank you are very basic feedback principles that come naturally to us. Why then is it often so very difficult for managers to give feedback to employees and to make that feedback effective and appropriate?

Delivery makes all the difference

As a manager in practice, I have learnt that it is not only the nature of the feedback that determines the reaction or outcome but also the delivery of that feedback. It is a mistake to think that just because the feedback you are charged with giving to your employee or colleague is positive that the reaction or outcome will also therefore be positive. For example, a colleague has made signifi-
cant improvements in an area of work where she has previously struggled to attain the required standard. The feedback given to her by her boss, is ‘That’s pretty good, for you – well done’. This is undeniably positive feedback as the member of staff has improved her performance and to such an extent that her boss has actually noticed. However, the casual off-hand delivery not only empha-
sises her previous poor performance in the area but also exposes the low expectation that her boss holds for her. The reaction to this feedback is likely to be a brief feeling of pride rapidly followed by deflation, resentment and, ultimately, a lack of respect for the boss.

Negative feedback is particularly difficult to deliver but it is crucial that this is delivered in a constructive manner. This way you can help solve the issue and contribute to the development of the individual and their behaviour. If it’s not delivered constructively, the feedback will be ignored, dismissed or received as an insult and the outcome is likely to be a new problem of a damaged working relationship.

Communication counts

How feedback is delivered and the degree to which it is successful is determined by the communication skills of the manager, and managers should always remem-
ber that proper communication with employees is not an option but should be a constant in the work place.

We tend to think of communication as being the spoken or written word, pictures or images, and body language or gestures. However, we should also remem-
ber that when we say nothing, when we stand still and when we fail to acknowledge, we are still communicat-
ing. We often hear it said that as a business if we stand still we go backwards, and the same can be said of com-
munication. If we fail to communicate in an effective way it is harder for us to make a positive difference.

Barriers

There are barriers to giving feedback and it is important to recognise what these are. Hesketh and Laidlaw (2002) identify a number of barriers to giving effective feedback specifically in the context of medical education:

- Fear of upsetting the learner or damaging the learner-mentor relationship;
- Fear of doing more harm than good;
- Resistance or defensiveness from the learner when receiving criticism – poor handling of a reaction to negative feedback can result in feedback being disregarded thereafter;
- Generalised feedback or feedback that is unrelated to specific facts or observations;
- Feedback lacking guidance for rectify the behaviour;
- Inconsistent feedback from multiple sources;
- Lack of respect for the source of feedback.

Parsloe (1995) also found that strong hierarchical structures within organisations could have an impact on the environment in which to give feedback. He states that in healthcare there are often tensions around professional role boundaries or status and that these can have an influence on the effectiveness of the feedback. It is easy to see how these findings in the healthcare environment can translate to the veterinary profession and how this may also pose problems for those both giving and receiving feedback. There are
also other issues such as differences in gender, age, education and culture that can have an effect on the delivery and reception of feedback.

Keeping some of these barriers in mind in order to identify possible hurdles in your practice can go a long way to avoiding interpersonal difficulties.

Types of feedback

There are two types of feedback, constructive and destructive, and these can be further subdivided into the two types of context in which they can be delivered, informal and formal.

Constructive and destructive feedback

Constructive feedback has six important qualities: it is timely, honest, clear, objective, specific and supportive. It creates an environment that encourages all parties to think of solutions and improvements, and therefore creates a motivating environment. Saying to someone, ‘You did well today’, is nice but it’s not as effective as it could be. Setting the context for the feedback – identifying the issue, the person’s involvement in it and stating the result – is a more effective way of feeding back. For instance you could say instead, ‘When you spoke to Ms Hopkins this morning about Bunny, I thought you did very well. It was a difficult case but you explained it clearly and I think she particularly appreciated the diagram. She has always been seen by a partner here but, I understand, she specifically asked to see you again so you must have established a good relationship with her. Well done.’

While this may essentially mean the same as, ‘You did well today’, it offers the individual so much more insight. They now know that explaining the problem in the way that they did was appropriate and correctly pitched. They also know that this was a client, strongly bonded to a partner, on whom they have had a positive impact. Most importantly though, this feedback gives them the confidence and direction to approach future issues.

The opposite side of the coin is destructive feedback, which is unhelpful, personal, judgmental, provocative and subjective. It creates an environment of resentment and crucially provides no encouragement or motivation and is likely to leave the problem unresolved. ‘I might have known you’d be at the bottom of this. Sort it out by the end of the day’ offers little to the employee other than a sickening feeling at the pit of their stomach. The feedback is not specific so the employee has no idea of the exact problem and it is unsupportive with no direction as to how to correct the issue.

Informal feedback

Informal feedback occurs on a day-to-day basis and in a spontaneous and less structured way. In this world of modern technology and social media, the opportunities for informal feedback are many and some employees may find these methods more genuine because of their spontaneity and timeliness. Likewise, managers may favour these methods as they are quick and easy to deliver and the informal nature lends sincerity – the boss has to hold a formal appraisal meeting but he doesn’t have to send a text to say well done.

Having a regular one-to-one with your practice manager, partner or clinical lead has the effect of keeping both parties informed of current issues, helps to prioritise tasks, and also provides opportunities for feedback. I follow the managing director of an organisation on Twitter and he regularly tweets comments such as ‘great work by the on-call team last night’ or ‘launch of our new website today – congratulations to Sharon and her team on a job well done’. Some employees are embarrassed to receive praise and compliments, especially in front of others, and it is possible that embracing social media in this way could help to overcome some of these barriers. Although feedback delivered in an informal way might seem to have a shorter life-span and may run the risk of being specific, compared to more formal approaches it can be very useful in helping to foster a positive culture of ongoing feedback, which encourages others to contribute as well.

Formal feedback: the appraisal

Formal feedback such as an appraisal or exit interview is more structured and requires greater preparation. Unfortunately, the very word ‘appraisal’ can strike fear into the hearts of the appraisee and appraiser alike and this is often borne out of previous bad experience.

Carried out properly, appraisals can be a useful tool for identifying areas for development and improvement but, carried out poorly, they can be divisive and destructive. For this reason it is recommended that a pay review is conducted separately from a performance review. An employee may find it difficult to talk about areas that they know require improvement during a meeting which also has their remuneration review on the agenda.

Appraisals are not just suited to larger organisations, although in smaller organisations, where managers have a closer working relationship with their staff, they may not always be necessary. However, in a busy fast-paced environment such as a veterinary practice, appraisals can provide the best or only opportunity for feedback.

Consider group feedback

Focus groups have been around nearly a century and research shows that they provide an environment where some people feel less vulnerable and can, therefore, be more honest and open in their contributions.

However, they do need careful planning and a good facilitator who understands the importance of maintaining a high level of equality, ethicality and confidentiality.

Groups should ideally be small in number, between six and 10 people, and the role of the facilitator, as an impartial driver, is critical.
Table 1: Matching feedback to the four stages of competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of competence</th>
<th>Unconscious incompetence</th>
<th>Conscious incompetence</th>
<th>Conscious competence</th>
<th>Unconscious competence</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of feedback</td>
<td>Low level of competence.</td>
<td>Low level of competence.</td>
<td>Demonstrates competence but skills are not fully internalised. Has to think about activities.</td>
<td>Carries out tasks with conscious thought. Skills are internalised and routine.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unaware of failings.</td>
<td>Aware of failings but not able to correct them.</td>
<td>Encouragement is still necessary but more focus on constructive feedback enables the learner to further refine skills.</td>
<td>Less positive feedback is required as it can lead to complacency. Encourage attention to detail through constructive feedback.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lots of positive regular feedback and encouragement enables the learner to be aware of areas for development. Too much constructive feedback at this stage results in demoralisation.</td>
<td>Balanced levels of encouragement and constructive feedback help the learner to develop necessary skills.</td>
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The critical purpose of an appraisal is to improve performance in the future. It should not be an opportunity to:

- Use the ‘blame stick’ and beat employees with it;
- Make direct comparisons between employees;
- Surprise the appraisee with a list of issues, unaddressed throughout the rest of the year but saved up specifically for that moment.

Appraisals also have the reputation of being merely form-filling exercises. In reality, although these forms are designed to focus the minds of both parties on continuous improvement and job success, they often end up simply providing a tedious, written record of what has been discussed.

As managers and leaders become more astute and aware, the 360 degree appraisal has risen in popularity. In this type of review, the individual's performance is seen and reported by a number of people: line managers, peers or even customers and suppliers. The data is gathered by the appraiser and can provide a better breadth of information to the review. However, this type of review comes with a health warning – for small organisations, particularly so. Strong personalities can shine through, as can personal grudges, and the employee may find themselves on the receiving end of some biased and damaging viewpoints. In addition, the organisational culture has to be ready to support this type of appraisal otherwise it can become a breeding ground for intimidation and bullying. (In doing the research for this article it struck me that a business employing 50 staff is often referred to as a small organisation has to give to an employee; however, managers and partners need feedback too. There is nothing more discouraging to a new manager, who is trying hard to create a culture of feedback, than to have their compliment thrown back at them. There have been many times, in my personal experience, when having praised someone’s work they turned around to simply reply, ‘It was nothing. I'm just doing my job.’ I fight my crushed feeling and think a simple ‘thank you’ would have done!

Learning from feedback

Feedback plays a strong part in the learning and development of an individual. It is the responsibility of the feedback giver to ensure they tailor their feedback to the appropriate learning stages for the individual. Table 1 shows the four stages of competence, as defined by Noel Burch and the Gordon Training Institution (1970). Under this approach, deciding to learn to ski would be unconscious incompetence, because the learner has no idea what they don’t know or how difficult it may be to learn. A day on the nursery slopes moves the learner into conscious incompetence; they realise that skiing requires hard work and skill. As they progress, they become consciously competent and can manoeuvre themselves unaided with some confidence. Once they become a proficient skier, they enter unconscious competence and they can perform the actions without conscious thought.

Summary

Feedback is essential not only to the learning and development of the individual but also the manager. Creating a culture in an organisation where everyone is comfortable about giving and receiving feedback is a great way to build employee morale, develop people’s skills and ensure continuous improvement for your business. Start by making a point of regularly delivering and asking for feedback yourself while reinforcing helpful behaviour in individuals and challenging less effective behaviour. Acting as a role model will encourage others to take your lead and should generate a healthy sharing of ideas and opinions.

Sadly, there is no quick fix to create this type of cultural shift but the benefits are attractive – improved employee loyalty, retention and engagement – and it’s worth putting in the work.

Whatever the current status of your business’s feedback culture, be aware that buying the team the occasional cake might be nice but it’s not enough!

References

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