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Feedback



Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

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Introduction

It's not often that you do something perfectly right first time! Feedback from others can help you to identify where you succeeded, where you did not do as well as you hoped and, most importantly, how to improve. People commenting on your work can be annoying but giving and receiving feedback and advice is a valuable skill you will need at work and in your life more widely.

The nature of feedback depends on the relationship between the giver and receiver, but a few general rules apply.

Why are we having this feedback session?

Some feedback involves a more senior member of the team approving a junior's work (e.g. 'well done! you have installed this component to the required standard'). This is generally fairly informal and is usually given soon after the work is completed. Other feedback covers a wider range of tasks and skills and may be part of a review of performance over a longer timescale. This will often be covered by guidelines developed in the company for appraisal or career development.

- Make sure you know the purpose of any feedback you give or receive and make sure the conversation meets its intended purpose.

Why is it sometimes difficult to receive advice?

Feedback does not always make us feel better! Our work is important to us, and we often have an emotional response to feedback. It can make us feel happy, sad, threatened, or undermined. These feelings are normal and can overwhelm the message of the feedback session. One of the most difficult sorts of feedback is 'drive-by feedback'. This happens when someone walks past you as you are working and just says something like 'oh I wouldn't do it that way' or 'you should already have finished this' and then walks away without offering any real help. Don't do this yourself and remember that un-asked-for advice, however well meant, always sounds like criticism!

- Make sure you understand that feedback can have an emotional impact on the receiver. Try to listen without feeling annoyed or threatened when it happens to you.

So how can I tell someone they have not reached a suitable standard?

When you have to tell people that they have got something wrong make sure you are respectful (no-one tries to do a bad job!) and clear about the specific problems with the work done. Phrases like 'this is no good at all' or 'you can do better than

this' are not usually helpful! Explain exactly what is bad, or good, about the work. Phrases like 'the fitting is not tight enough and the motor will work loose over time' identifies the particular problem, and a way to solve it. Similarly phrases like 'you managed to use some of the scrap from the previous job to complete this one so saving money and resources' is good because it highlights what you want to see more of in the future.

- Make sure you give specific comments about the particular job showing how it worked well, or not, rather than general comments. If you are receiving feedback, ask for specific ways in which you can improve.

What should be the outcome from a good feedback session?

Feedback is not your opportunity to complain about someone or tell them off! It should always lead to improved performance either by encouraging people to do more of what they do well or change the way they do things that are not going so well. Ensure that the conversation is open (both people should talk and listen), focused (it's about the specific job), evidence-based (make sure you have evidence to back up your comments) and productive (always agree ways forward). Always end with clear agreements about exactly what will happen next. If it needs extra resources or training, make sure people know where to get these. Just agreeing to 'try harder!' is not a useful outcome!

- Make sure your feedback session is open, focused, evidence-based, and productive with agreed actions for the person who has received the feedback. If something outside the meeting has to happen (e.g. supplying training, changing departments) make sure this happens.

What if I think that the feedback is unfair or wrong?

Giving feedback can be as difficult as receiving it and people do not always get it right every time. If you think that your feedback is unfair there will be systems within the company or institution to appeal against it. Note that this does not mean you can complain about negative feedback if you have failed to do the job properly. Appeals are only possible when the feedback is unfair either in what was said or in the way it was said. Appealing against any judgements by an employer is not easy but it is your right, as a student or an employee, to be treated with respect. If you do need to complain about feedback, make sure you are clear about exactly what you felt was unfair or disrespectful and have evidence to back up your complaints. Remember

also, if you have to provide feedback, that others have the same rights so treat everyone with respect – even if you have to ask them to do the job again to a higher standard. Complaints are rare but they do not make for a happy work environment so behave in ways that minimise the chances of them happening.

- Make sure you are aware of the complaints procedure in your workplace and use it if you need to. Similarly, behave in a way that reduces the chances of anyone having to make a complaint about you.



Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. What is the main purpose of feedback?
2. Give two reasons you might appeal if your feedback is not good.
3. What is 'drive by feedback' and why should you never do it?



Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Think about times you have received feedback from a teacher or a manager. Did you feel the feedback was respectful and linked to the task you had completed? How did the feedback help you to understand what you needed to do to develop? How did you record any suggested changes to your work, and did you make those changes? Is there anything you wish your manager, or you, had said or done in the meeting? List three things you would do when you were giving or receiving feedback to make future sessions better.
2. A feedback session can be stressful and the best way to avoid this is to prepare carefully. The first job is to collect the evidence that will inform the discussion. What evidence is available about your work? Do you have to keep a logbook or get your work checked by a teacher or supervisor? Reflect on the evidence people would find about your work – do you feel comfortable that they would find enough evidence to say that you are doing well?