THE EMPLOYEE'S

ULTIMATE GUIDE

TO GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

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Make Work Better.

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WHY FEEDBACK MATTERS

We all need and even crave feedback. It helps us know how we're doing, what we did that others appreciated, and things we can do differently to improve the next time.

For an organization, creating a healthy culture of real-time feedback allows it to reinforce and replicate positive and productive behaviors, discourage bad habits, facilitate good communication, promote learning, and build mutually beneficial connections among employees. Solid feedback loops keep performance strong across your organization and even elevate your culture.

Feedback can be given to anyone by anyone in the organization for any reason, and good feedback will always be relevant, frequent, and meaningful. According to recent Gallup research, when employees strongly agreed they had received "meaningful feedback" in the past week, **they were nearly 4x more likely than other employees to be engaged.**

What employees want

Surveys like the **Betterworks State of Performance Enablement Survey** consistently show that employees and managers want more and better feedback.

of employees wish they had a better technology solution for giving and receiving feedback and recognition.

of managers cited technology to deliver feedback and recognition as one of the top 3 things they need to be better managers.

of employees never see feedback outside of their direct managers.

of employees don't receive feedback from colleagues more than once a quarter.

Source: 2022 State of Performance Enablement Report

HOW WE DEFINE FEEDBACK VERSUS CONVERSATIONS

What makes feedback different from other conversations and performance management tools in your organization, such as reviews, goal setting, and check-ins?

Unpacking the terms

At Betterworks, we follow the lead of organizational psychologists and bucket the various kinds of performance management interactions into two general categories: feedback, which is the topic of this guide, and conversations, which we unpack in our companion piece, **The Manager's Ultimate Guide to Great Conversations.**

Here is how we define them.

Feedback:

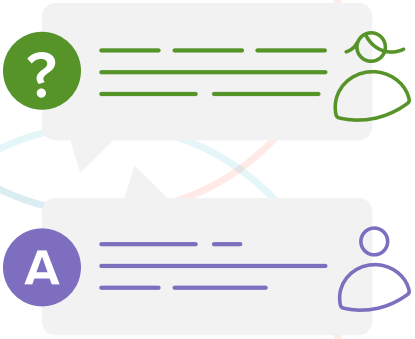
- *Between an employee and anyone they work with, including managers and skip-level managers*
- *Formal or informal*
- *Scheduled or spontaneous*
- *Examines behavior that has already occurred to facilitate learning*
- *Focus is on reflections that help an individual close the gap between where they are and where they should be*

Feedback can — and often should — take place between co-workers, peers, or leaders who have worked with an employee. Feedback might be requested by or offered to an employee or manager, or prompted by the organization. Feedback from a manager typically comes in the form of coaching.

Feedback is focused on examining specific past performance and offering insights and takeaways to inform future success. It might be corrective input, constructive input, appreciation, or simply reflection and encouragement.

Colleagues may also request feedback from a coaching or mentoring perspective — specifically related to career or longer-term goals.

HOW WE DEFINE FEEDBACK VERSUS CONVERSATIONS



Feedback might include:

- *Performance/output or skills assessment (hard and soft skills)*
- *Project review*
- *Appreciation*
- *Coaching*
- *Mentoring*

Conversations:

- *Between a manager and a direct or skip-level report*
- *Formal or informal*
- *Scheduled or spontaneous*
- *Future-focused coaching and development moments*
- *Focus is usually on facilitating success in employee behaviors, success strategies, goals, and career aspirations*

We define conversations as dialogues between a manager and their employee. This might be a direct reporting or a skip-level relationship, but it will always occur within a vertical reporting structure — where the manager carries responsibility for employee performance. For more information, download **The Manager's Ultimate Guide to Great Conversations.**

The goal for both types of interactions is to **drive consistency, readiness, immediacy, and actionable outcomes**. It's important to have these interactions in real time to better understand the needs of your direct reports and offer **guidance that is meaningful**, as well as to **better enable growth, learning, and connectedness**.

— Caitlin Collins | Organizational Psychologist & Program Strategy Director, Betterworks

WHEN AND WHY TO GIVE FEEDBACK

To be most effective, feedback should be requested and given as close to the event as possible — what we call "anytime feedback." A second, but much less useful type of feedback, which can be used as a temporary measure for certain organizations, is scheduled or delayed feedback. Both are explained below. We recommend that organizations provide technology, templates, and processes to support sharing feedback and building muscle memory for how to request, give, and act upon feedback.

ANYTIME VS. SCHEDULED FEEDBACK

1. Anytime feedback

Feedback that is shared in the moment is most conducive for offering real-time observations, and responding to urgent needs or unanticipated events. It is the most commonly used type of feedback and is highly valuable because it allows employees to receive and act on input in the moment, and leverage learnings immediately to improve work.

WHEN AND WHY TO GIVE FEEDBACK

An **authoritative scientific study** showed that feedback is the most powerful when it relates to a person's goals, articulates how an output met expectations, and provides clear and tangible steps for improvement. The study also showed that delayed feedback can be an impediment to goal progress and learning, and is more likely to result in a negative impact on the person's self-esteem. That makes anytime feedback a very important part of any performance management toolkit.

Real-time feedback on goal achievement is one of the benefits that provides the most value to employees, but feedback may also arise during the course of work to include appreciation or corrective triage for a looming concern. Though this kind of feedback might originate outside of performance management software, it's a good idea to funnel it through your platform to record and measure it.

PROS

- Quickly highlight wins or note what went well to reinforce repeatable behaviors
- Seek or provide course corrections in the moment to maximize impact
- Drives an environment of continuous learning and development
- Improves productivity and outcomes more effectively and efficiently
- Emboldens more ownership of one's performance and achievements
- Builds great coaching skills throughout the workforce
- Enables teams of people to work more effectively

CONS

- Building a culture of feedback can be challenging and requires planning, reinforcement, and follow through

2. Scheduled Feedback

Betterworks does not recommend scheduled or delayed feedback except in cases where an organization's culture is not accustomed to seeking or providing feedback. In these instances, scheduled or delayed feedback can be used as a temporary measure for organizations to transition from a "no feedback" program or formal annual feedback to a culture of real-time feedback.

Scheduled feedback is planned feedback that will be a predictable part of your organization's established practices for performance enablement as your people start to build their feedback muscle. They may be planned cycles that are run quarterly to mimic real-time feedback for the quarter.

However, this is still considered to be delayed feedback. While it doesn't deliver immediate learning and performance improvement, it provides value by building the muscle or habit of giving and receiving feedback. These interactions are baked into the structure of how you work and follow a standardized template. They are typically first captured and documented in your feedback platform. Although not required, it's a best practice to accompany feedback with a face-to-face meeting.

PROS

- Predictable, consistent opportunities for communication
- Provides practice for participants to become comfortable with giving and receiving feedback
- Standardizes participation across roles
- Creates clear expectations for participation
- Familiar templates help to guide feedback
- Holds stakeholders accountable

CONS

- May become perfunctory and emotional
- Timing often does not coincide with the need for timely feedback
- Too many formal requests for feedback at one time may be burdensome

FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

While established questions for anytime feedback can be useful in all scenarios, it's important for the requester or giver to provide specific questions or answers based on the project, activity, or behavior. They typically seek input in the following areas:

- What did this person do well with what was delivered?
- What were the outcomes of what was delivered?
- Did this meet expectations?
- What specifically could this person work on or improve to do better next time?

VALUE OF TIMELY FEEDBACK

Most people prefer feedback close to the event. The impact and value of feedback diminishes over time, and if given freely too long after the event, the recipient may perceive it as critical or an afterthought lacking in importance. It's also best to provide feedback quickly when details are fresh in everyone's mind. When offering feedback, it is usually appropriate to also ask for the same in return, even if simply to request feedback on the feedback you provided.

That isn't to say you should bombard colleagues with input or burden them with requests — but a stream of meaningful interactions across different formats is the bedrock of a healthy feedback culture. You should plan on offering and/or asking for feedback from people other than your manager or direct reports when projects or deliverables are completed.

WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

Some people find giving feedback stressful. They may have things to say, but are unsure of how to give corrective and even positive feedback in a way that will be constructive, authentic, and not upsetting or insulting to the recipient.

In this section, we share insights and explore some of the best practices we've compiled at Betterworks to help you give the most effective feedback possible. We'll start with the anatomy of great feedback, which describes the types of feedback. Then we'll cover tips for offering feedback, and finally, the psychology of feedback, including guidelines for providing both positive and constructive feedback.

THE ANATOMY OF GREAT FEEDBACK

Feedback generally falls into three categories: appreciation, coaching, and evaluational. All three types can be delivered in a single evaluation. To be effective, the giver should aim to provide feedback that is specific, objective, and future-forward.

Appreciation-focused feedback recognizes someone for the hard work, outstanding efforts, or adherence to company values they reflected in their behaviors. When someone knows exactly what they did well, they will understand how to repeat it.

Coaching-focused feedback provides suggestions or guidance on how to improve an aspect of a work project, action, or behavior. It is future-oriented, helping the person understand what to do differently the next time.

Evaluational feedback is typically requested by an employee and helps them understand how their output (e.g., interactions, project, presentation) compares against expectations. It's a way for us, as recipients of this feedback, to understand where we are starting from and where we should be by answering the question, "Did I accomplish what I set out to, and why or why not?"

You can use feedback templates to help you deliver your observations in a more powerful way, and your performance management solution should make those available to you at a team or organizational level.

TIPS FOR OFFERING FEEDBACK

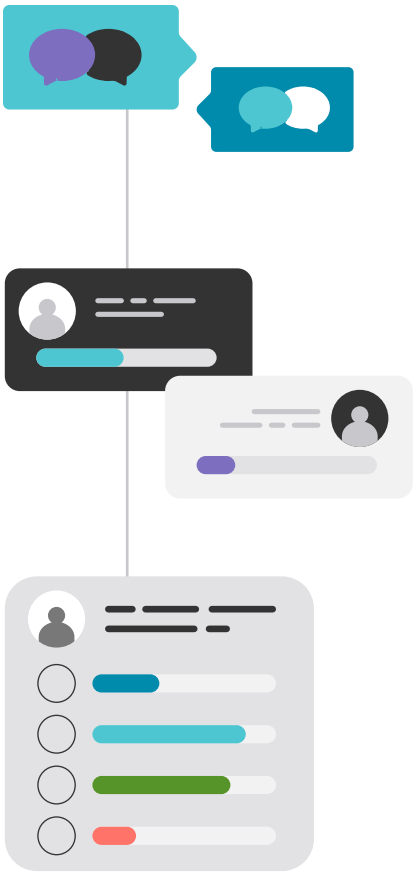
Building and establishing a culture of real-time feedback can be a powerful tool for improvement and innovation. Feedback is a gift, but for some, it can be a challenging gift to give and a hard gift to receive.

Whether feedback is requested, solicited as part of a process, or is something you want to offer spontaneously — be sure that you construct it in a way that is authentic, clear, and impactful. It should not be used to prove a point or win an argument. Rather, feedback should enable the recipient to come away with tangible next steps.

These steps provide a basic guide for how to write effective feedback.

1. **Prepare and validate** – Be sure you know what you want to share and why. Think about the actual behavior or action you're trying to impact and avoid tangents.
2. **Consider your colleague** – Is there a way they would prefer to hear feedback?
3. **Seek understanding** – Avoid making unfounded assumptions. Ask questions that increase your understanding of context and the other person's perspective (e.g., Instead of asking "How did you think you performed?" ask "What preparation for this presentation was afforded to you?")

4. **Keep it conversational** – Too much formality will make your feedback sound cold.
5. **Maintain objectivity** – Avoid providing feedback through an emotional lens, which can be hurtful, but instead make your observations fact-based. Talk about skills, knowledge, and behavior over personality or style.
6. **Weigh the metrics** – Look at metrics that matter and confirm output against expectations.
7. **Maintain balance** – Take as much effort to offer messages of encouragement and praise as you do constructive criticism.



8. **Ensure feedback is learning- and future-oriented** – Think about long-term learnings and outcomes. This focus enables the giver of feedback to offer recommendations for improvement rather than concentrate on past problems.
9. **Communicate intent clearly** – Be as clear and fact-based as possible.
10. **Acknowledge the context** – Express empathy for the situation and humanize your observations.
11. **Provide context** – Proactively share examples or data to illustrate your points in an objective way.
12. **Recommend next steps** – Offer solutions where possible.
13. **Ask for feedback in return** – Ask for feedback on your own contributions or the feedback itself.

Feedback should not be about 'me' or how I felt slighted or how I feel threatened. Feedback should be about the other person, enabling them to clearly understand how they did and what they should do differently next time.

There isn't a person in the world who improves and succeeds on their own in a vacuum. **We all require feedback to learn** what to improve and how to improve so that we can succeed.

— **Caitlin Collins** | Organizational Psychologist & Program Strategy Director, Betterworks

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FEEDBACK

The human mind is a complicated machine, and sometimes — let's face it — a baffling puzzle. Here are some fundamentals everyone should keep in mind when they are preparing feedback for a colleague.

Accentuate the Positive

When trying to motivate people and improve their performance, should you be more positive and encouraging, or constructively critical in your approach? You will have two ways you can approach issues that arise:

> **Positive feedback** is talking about what has been done right and encouraging more of it. It's not simply telling someone they did great but instead is specific about what they did well so they know what to repeat.
>
> **Constructive feedback** is about pointing out what has been done suboptimally and providing objective and meaningful feedback to try to preclude it from happening again.

Ultimately, the balance of these will depend on you, your colleagues, and the situations you are facing on your team. Shying away from addressing problems may seem polite but ultimately doesn't help you or your team members. But, taking time to notice what people have done well is essential for creating high-performing and collaborative teams. Be as quick to offer those observations, as you might be to share a more corrective critique.

It can be tempting to combine positive and constructive feedback in order to "soften the blow" and prevent people from feeling upset or angry (see below). However, experts suggest that you **keep positive and negative praise separate** to avoid miscommunication. According to **past studies in the Harvard Business Review**, the ideal ratio of praise to constructive criticism is 5:1, but if you're tempted to mix them, oftentimes that sort of "praise sandwich" can lead to mixed messages. Employees may either hyper-fixate on critical feedback and miss the praise — or focus on the praise and miss the very real issues you are trying to communicate.

Tips for positive feedback

Use positive feedback to help people create new behaviors or to call out existing behavior that you want to see continue.

- *Be specific and offer examples so colleagues understand what they did well or what you want them to do now*
- *Help colleagues understand their broader impact on the organization*
- *Give encouragement as a flow of anytime feedback, as the behavior occurs*

Tips for constructive feedback

Constructive feedback is important to swiftly address and correct high-risk, unproductive, or unacceptable behavior.

- *Give as close as possible to the event or behavior*
- *Avoid the "praise sandwich" — bracketing constructive observations with positive ones to minimize a hostile or anxious response, as this comes off as inauthentic and can dilute both your positive and more critical observations*
- *When offering constructive feedback, be as clear as possible and offer examples and specifics on why things didn't work*

HOW TO ASK FOR FEEDBACK

As a participant in a culture of feedback, there will be times you may want to solicit input from others on your own performance. Sometimes asking for feedback can feel scary because it makes us vulnerable. That feeling is to be expected. It helps to keep in mind that requesting and understanding others' perspectives can help you take the right actions to improve your work and be a more effective team member. Everyone gives and receives feedback differently, so not all feedback may be exactly what you hoped for. To ensure the feedback you get is most useful to you, consider the following advice:

Asking for Feedback

- Ask the right people – Be sure the people you ask will be able to give you objective input and were in a position to best observe your strengths and weaknesses
- Ask more than one person – Don't rely on a single point of view
- Ask for feedback immediately after an event when the memory is fresh
- Be specific with what you'd like to know by asking clear questions or asking for numeric ratings on certain skills
- Ask some open-ended questions to open the dialogue for things you may not have considered

UNDERSTANDING FEEDBACK TRIGGERS

Feedback, when received well, is tremendously insightful and rewarding because the recipient can apply the learnings from feedback, often immediately, to improve their outcomes. And who doesn't want to be better at what they do?

Not all feedback is easy to give — even for the most experienced givers — and like most everything else, it takes practice. The same can be said about receiving feedback. That's because both giving and receiving feedback makes us vulnerable. As the recipient, you may disagree with it, dislike the person providing the feedback, or feel bad about yourself. As employees, we want to protect our safety and security, our jobs, and our sense of belonging — much of which depends on a positive image of our performance at work. When feedback threatens that image, it can send us into "fight or flight" mode.

In their book, **Thanks for the Feedback**, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen identify three types of feedback triggers that can set this off — which are most likely to surface when you receive difficult feedback.

Truth triggers ("I disagree.")

Truth triggers are set off by the actual content of the feedback itself. If a piece of feedback feels inaccurate, unhelpful, or simply untrue, it will trigger a cognitive and emotional reaction. The challenge lies in helping employees (or yourself as the recipient) see the situation as the giver of the feedback does. These triggers can often expose our blind spots.

The recipient may think:

- "That's wrong!"
- "That's not helpful"
- "That's so unfair!"
- "That's not me!"

When you see a fellow employee, your direct report, or yourself responding to a truth trigger, it's time for self-reflection.

The recipient should ask:

» Why do I see it this way?
» Does person providing the feedback have data or interpretations that are different than mine?
» What am I reacting to?"
» Is there truth to it?"

Seek clarification to gain greater understanding.

Ask the feedback provider:

» Can you give me an example?
» What did that mean to you?
» What do you see me doing when I'm getting in my own way?

Relationship triggers ("I don't get along with you.")

Relationship triggers have to do with the particular person who is giving us feedback. All feedback is seen through the lens of the relationship between the giver and receiver. Reactions to feedback will be colored by this relationship and we may assign more or less credulity to the feedback, as our focus shifts from what is being said to who is saying it. If we don't trust the other person, we don't value them. If we feel they are out to get us, we'll never hear what they have to say.

The recipient may think:

» "Who are you to say this?"
» "After all I've done for you!"
» "You're the problem, not me"
» "You don't trust me."

This trigger is tough to navigate. However, a good first step is to try to separate the feedback from the relationship to examine the feedback on its own merits. Then ask clarifying questions, examine supporting evidence or data, and ask for feedback from other sources to gain an accurate perspective that is not steeped in emotion.

The recipient should ask:

» What would be my reaction to the feedback if it was given by someone I feel neutral toward?
» Am I contributing to this issue, and if so, how?

If the relationship is strained, it may be important to clear the air first before requesting (or providing) feedback so that there is some common ground. The more we're able to find the objectivity in the feedback, the more we can remove layers of emotions that block our receipt of it.

Ask the feedback provider:

» Can you help me understand your feedback?
» Can we talk about how and why you're offering this feedback and some of my concerns?

Identity triggers ("I feel bad about myself.")

Identity triggers are about us — who we are and how we feel about ourselves. Regardless of whether feedback is valid or not, if something about it causes us to feel like our identity is under attack, we could begin to spin — feeling threatened, overwhelmed, ashamed, or panicked. The challenge, here, is ourselves, not the situation or the other person.

The recipient may think:

» "I made a mess of everything."
» "I'm doomed."
» "I'm not a bad person, am I?"
» "How can this be happening to me?"

This trigger is perhaps most difficult to overcome because there is so much of our self-worth at stake. Outside reassurance and encouragement from a trusted colleague or manager is often helpful in establishing perspective in these situations.

The recipient should ask:

» How is my wiring causing me to swing?
» Is there an opportunity to learn and grow from this?

The goal is to move from the emotion of the moment and leverage it as a learning and growth opportunity.

Ask the feedback provider:

» Can you help me get perspective on your feedback?"
» What could I do that would help me improve?

WHAT TO DO WITH FEEDBACK

Feedback can feel great, or it can be debilitating if done incorrectly. Most often it falls somewhere in between. When you ask someone for feedback, it's important to listen to what they say (or understand what they write) and process it. While you may not agree with it, it's a perspective you should consider.

As feedback coach Shanita Williams, professor and author of **Feedback Mentality**, writes: "Where we get it wrong is that we think any bit of information means that we are 'less than' as a person or that we are unworthy or unfit or incapable. When really, feedback is just information, and you have the power to decide what you do with it."

When receiving constructive feedback that may be difficult to hear, it's important not to give in to the temptation to get defensive or beat yourself up. The first question you should always ask yourself is how you might use the input to improve — even if you don't agree with all of it.

Tips for receiving feedback

- Be a good listener
- Try not to be defensive
- Ask for examples to clarify anything you don't understand
- Ask clarifying questions, or for interpretation and advice
- Seek additional points of view if needed
- Thank the provider

LEVERAGING FEEDBACK TECHNOLOGY

While feedback is often tied to specific projects, events, and deliverables, each piece of feedback we receive is a data point in our employee development journey. Use your technology solution to facilitate asking for and offering feedback — and also to follow up on advice and make adjustments to your goals that align with new objectives.

Your performance management solution can help you document conversations, record notes and actions on feedback to you, and set and track goals for yourself over time.

Be sure you are making the most of technology on this journey. This is where a tool such as Betterworks can help — with templates and prompts that help you and your team align to best practices. The more feedback you offer and request, the more skilled you will become at crafting and receiving it in a meaningful and impactful way.

Good technology will help you:

- Schedule and support scheduled and anytime feedback
- Provide templates to help guide communication of feedback
- Support you in proactively offering or asking for feedback from others in the organization

Does your organization have the technology in place to support good feedback?

Tour the Betterworks solution:

Watch a demo **Schedule a detailed demo**

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Make Work Better.

Discover Betterworks

Companies like Colgate-Palmolive, Intuit, Freddie Mac, and Udemy rely on Betterworks as their performance management infrastructure — enabling great performance through dedicated people technology.

Betterworks' best-in-class HR talent management solutions are designed to drive exceptional performance by putting employee experience at the heart of how companies align, motivate, retain, and develop their people. Unlike legacy HR technology, Betterworks is a lightweight, enterprise-ready solution that integrates with the tools employees use every day.

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