

## Forget About Feedback

Project management is a tough job. Where else would you be expected to manage something that is temporary, has not been done before, is loosely defined, is constantly changing, is laden with complexity risk and unrealistic expectations and is set within fixed constraints including resources, budget, time, process, organisation and culture?

Projects depend very much on the team and teamwork. One of the fundamental roles of the project manager is to provide feedback to team members on their performance. Feedback is supposed to show someone the impact of their behaviour with a view to helping them improve performance in the future.

Many of us do not know how to do feedback properly. This is not surprising as we tend to get very little practice. It is very common for feedback to be given rarely or for it to be part of an annual performance review process. Feedback is often therefore, too little, too late. And many of us avoid giving feedback altogether as we see it as a potential source of conflict. The problem is that poorly delivered feedback can alienate team members and stop them functioning effectively. And the malaise can spread quickly through the team.

Part of the problem is the 'back' in feedback. Feedback tends to focus on past events. As such, it can be a limited and static affair. In projects, we cannot afford to be limited or static or to focus on the past. While we might hope to learn from the past, it's history and can't be changed. So given these difficulties, why not try a little *Feedforward*?

Feedforward is a term coined by Marshal Goldsmith in his article "Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback". Feedforward has a helping perspective and focuses on the future. It is thus particularly suitable for a project environment for the following reasons:

- The focus must always be on the future and the next deadline.
- We can't afford to lose anyone - everyone must be kept on board.
- Often we are stuck with the resources that we have and we must make the most of them.
- Team morale can be delicately balanced and poorly delivered feedback can be a tipping point.
- We must be resilient. Project teams must have a high bounceability quotient. The alienation caused by poorly delivered feedback can impact on a team's ability to bounce back.

There are many good reasons to try a little Feedforward with your project teams including:

1. It comes from a much more positive perspective i.e. we are all in this together so let's help each other out. This changes the whole dynamic of the relationship.
2. It is not judgemental.
3. The negative connotations of past failures are banished. There is no such thing as failure just Feedforward.
4. It is much easier to deliver. People are less defensive when discussing future performance. Feedforward is taken less personally and provokes less resistance.
5. It is faster. Dwelling on past events can consume a lot of time. It can be much quicker to suggest a few well thought out ideas for the future.
6. The past is history, today is the present and tomorrow is an adventure. We can only change our behaviours from today onwards. What's the point on focussing on past failures? Isn't it much better to focus on the future we desire?
7. Feedforward is much more aligned with coaching and is therefore better at building the kind of relationships needed to develop the team towards maximum performance.
8. Most people actually like to be helped to improve their performance as this will ultimately make them more successful in their careers.

9. Communication, the soul of successful projects, will be greatly enhanced.  
10. Why invest time and energy in something that we all hate?  
Consider the following example from an IT project.

A team member called Tom was responsible for installing and configuring a new server. During the install, Tom forgot to install the anti-virus software. As a result, the server became infected with multiple viruses and ground to a halt. The problems were difficult to diagnose and fix and the project lost two full days from the schedule due to the testing phase being interrupted.

What is the project manager Bob, to do with Tom? The feedback approach will delve into what happened, the consequences and the impact on the schedule. The negatives are restated and emphasised. Let me ask you this question? In situations like this, who usually knows most about the facts of what happened and the consequences? Of course, its Tom and Tom will more than likely deeply regret his error and most definitely will not make that mistake again. So it can be reasonably stated that this approach is useless.

Now let's try Feedforward. The Feedforward approach will focus on the future. Remember, there is no such thing as failure, just Feedforward. Bob might say something like the following to Tom. "I remember when I was a techie, I used to compile a checklist of tasks when installing servers. There are so many things to be considered, that it is very easy to forget about something. Actually, it would be great for this project and future projects if we had a standard checklist for all installs".

This is a completely different approach. Tom will more than likely see this as a great idea that he will take on board. He will probably also see this as an opportunity to do something that will help him and others now and in the future. The whole situation has been turned around and has become an opportunity for Tom to develop, grow and shine! And just look at the positive results for relationships. Tom's and Bob's relationship can only be stronger. When the news spreads around the wider team, it will most likely strengthen more relationships and the regard the team have for Bob.

Altogether a much better outcome, wouldn't you think?

© Project Management Edge 2009

PM Edge is a dedicated project management company that collaborates with organisations to enhance their project management capability. Our unique coaching and partnering approach will help you to achieve necessary change through successful projects. Our services cover all of the necessary elements – project coaching, training and consulting – required to make your projects work.

If you would like to find more free resources and how we can collaborate to make your projects work, please visit [www.pmedge.ie](http://www.pmedge.ie)