**The Power of Positive Feedback:**

**A Tool for Supervisory Success**

Ombuds and Human Resource officers often hear similar messages from employees: “My supervisor only tells me what I’m doing wrong” or “I rarely receive positive feedback for my contributions.” When work-life gets busy and time is limited, it’s easy to forget that a little time spent acknowledging good work can go a long way. In fact, there’s good reason for providing more positive feedback to your employees than critical feedback – you and your employees will both be more effective and engaged at work.

**Processing Feedback**

Positive feedback is more influential in helping employees be successful than negative feedback (Amabile & Kramer 2011; Daniels 2000; Gottman & Levenson 1999; Tugend 2012; Green, Gino, Staats 2017). Humans are programmed to experience negative events with greater depth than positive ones, perhaps because of evolutionary tendencies that give greater attention to unpleasant events that may threaten survival (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs 2001). Negative feedback may also manifest as psychological threats that result in physical consequences such as anxiety and depression (Green, Gino, & Staats 2017).

Communicating to employees in positive ways is central to supporting the dimensions of employees’ work-lives. Positive feedback from supervisors entails setting clear, attainable goals; adequate support for goal success; identification and acknowledgment of small wins and movement towards goals; identification of learning opportunities (instead of mistakes) from problems; and goal completion (Amabile & Kramer 2011). Moreover, employees’ work-lives are enriched when they are given opportunities to use their creativity, demonstrate progress towards the completion of goals, and are provided opportunities to work with supportive co-workers and peers (Amabile & Kramer 2011).

**Positive Feedback is Part of Effective Performance Management**

Performance Management is comprised of the measurement of employee activity and job performance, feedback about performance, and positive reinforcement (Daniels 2016). To measure performance, effective supervisors:

* Collect and review data about employee job activity, job expectations and goals.
* Give feedback during structured, regularly scheduled meetings with employees to review performance and progress.
* Provide positive reinforcement by acknowledging employees’ improved performance and behaviors towards performance goals.

Providing positive feedback and reinforcement are more effective than negative comments in keeping employees engaged and productive (Amabile & Kramer 2011; Daniels 2000; Gottman & Levenson 1999; Tugend 2012; Green, Gino, Staats 2017). While negative feedback can be useful in guarding against complacency, unsafe practices, and workplace disengagement, it does not help improve employee behavior in the long run (Zenger & Folkman 2013). In fact, negative feedback and reinforcement, such as threats and undesirable outcomes, are more likely to create a climate of hostility and fear than instill creativity and commitment among employees (Daniels 2016; Zenger & Folkman 2013). Feedback should be more positive than critical and is most effective when given soon after an incident has occurred. Effective supervisors integrate regular feedback into their performance management plans (Daniels 2000; 2016).

**The Ideal Praise-to-Criticism Ratio**

Giving employees critical feedback is sometimes necessary to address inappropriate behavior, or to provide clarification on expectations. However, negative feedback should be used sparingly because individuals are more apt to remember negative interactions and events over positive ones (Tugend 2012; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs 2001). To minimize the negative impact of critical feedback, supervisors are advised to deliver a minimum ratio of four or five positive comments for every negative comment (Daniels 2016; Zenger & Folkman 2013; Tugend 2012). As Baumeister et al (2001) found, many good experiences can overcome the psychological effects of a single negative one. Moreover, human beings’ innate need for interaction that supports a positive sense of self is so strong that they will intentionally seek out new, more supportive social networks if they are not receiving positive reinforcement within their assigned units (Green, Gino & Staats 2017). Subsequently, providing positive feedback will encourage employees to stay engaged in their assigned workplace units, where their inner work-lives may be aptly and fully engaged.

**The Benefits of Positive Feedback**

Providing ongoing, positive feedback to employees can help improve performance through reinforcement of desired behaviors. Positive interactions also create trust, reward employees by acknowledging their value, and create an environment that’s conducive to employee satisfaction and growth. Supervisors can use the power of positive feedback as a performance tool by:

* Acknowledging strong performance soon after behaviors are observed.
* Establishing structured, ongoing meetings that include feedback.
* Following the minimum 80% positive to 20% critical feedback ratio – to increase the likelihood that employees recall the ongoing positive feedback they received.
* Allowing employees time for processing and responding to critical feedback.
* Revisiting and establishing achievable goals together, providing professional development opportunities to improve performance, and providing positive feedback and guidance to acknowledge accomplishments.

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