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Abstract

Feedback is essential in all companies, in society and in educational environments. We learn, improve and develop from it in our examinations, group work, work environment and relationships. Feedback however must be supported with good communications and be consistent. In the classroom environment this means providing feedback in a positive and supportive manner, and being consistent to all. Most if not all managers and leaders, including lecturers have not undertaken any form of training in feedback methods and therefore it is not translated effectively, causing stress or misguidance to students and colleagues. This paper highlights the importance of good feedback, how it can be provided effectively and why it is rarely communicated. Students are consistently asking for feedback and highlight it in quality reports and surveys as a major weakness in the delivery of modules and course work. Some of the issues raised are associated with poor preparation, habits and styles of delivery. With the increasing requirement from Validation and Accreditation authorities to verify if learners are receiving appropriate feedback, this is one area where staff and managers can enhance the quality of the learning environment. Feedback is not only a two way process between lecturers and students but is also a critical activity between management and staff in developing a healthy working environment. Relevant feedback to first year students in particular via verbal or electronic means sets the standard for subsequent years. It is also essential that the quality work undertaken by lecturers to students is acknowledged and supported by management.
Keywords: Feedback, student performance, communications

1.1 Introduction

It often arises that one student in a class receives more information than others because he/she happened to ask the correct questions. Other students who do not receive the same information or fail to ask relevant questions are baffled by this and get frustrated and often write negative reviews of the lecturer as a result. Some students pick up feedback incorrectly and misinform their fellow students, resulting in more frustration, especially during examination periods. There is also a belief that effort should produce rewards but that is only true if the person knows what is required of them and they are properly directed so that effort generates performance and thus successful results. Feedback is fundamental to effective communication and in the context of developing competence, feedback drives performance.

Providing precise feedback to learners to steer them in the correct direction will generate that result a lot easier. The greatest impact is when students leave a programme due to a combination of reasons, some of which relate to motivation and feedback and this can equate to 25% of a class in the first year of study. Apart from the negative impact this has on staff and fellow students, Institutions rarely look for feedback as to why this has happened.

Feedback is the process in which part of the output of a system is returned to its input in order to regulate its further output. It should be an essential part of education, training and personal development. It helps learners to maximize their potential at different stages of training, raise their awareness of strengths and areas for improvement, and identify actions to be taken to improve performance. The most effective leaders actively seek feedback to enhance their performance.

Feedback can be seen as informal as in day-to-day encounters between teachers and students, peers or colleagues or formal as part of written assessment. However, *there is no sharp dividing line between assessment and teaching in the area of giving feedback on learning.*

It is difficult to be self-aware without feedback from others. Feedback from others informs us in ways that enriches our self-knowledge.

Communications are more effective where feedback is applied. It is possible to judge to what extent the communication is getting through, and an opportunity is given for questioning which leads to clarification. Conferences and meetings in particular have a considerable advantage in permitting this kind of feedback. The impact of failing to provide feedback to learners, are many and if we don't provide feedback, what is the learner gaining, or assuming. They may for instance believe that everything is fine and that there are no areas for improvement. Learners value feedback, especially when it is given by someone credible who they respect for their knowledge and/or experience.

Some people in the workplace suffer from poor performance as a result of not receiving feedback and it is very common in many organisations and Educational Institutions. A dearth of feedback occurs even in small organisations, in teams and in families. The *Feedback Famine* is a vacuum that occurs when people receive inadequate information in respect to their performance. This concerns on-going, regular and informal feedback. It is timely, specific and may help the individual ascertain:

- Whether they were successful or not in achieving their goals
- What they are supposed to be achieving in their role i.e. why their role exists
- What they are currently doing well and what areas require improvement
- How they are impacting on others in the workplace

Feedback gives an indication of "how individuals affect others in the workplace". Modern organisations recognise the importance of how people achieve their goals, not just what they achieve. Staff have the right to expect that they will be treated with respect and supported to achieve their goals.

1.2 The importance of feedback

Feedback is the cheapest, most powerful, yet, most underused management tool that we have at our disposal. It helps people get on track and serves as a guide to assist people to know how they and others perceive their performance.

Feedback can also be highly motivating and energising. It has strong links to employee satisfaction and productivity. People like to feel involved and identified with their organisation. Effective leaders have good listening and emotional awareness – they understand the impact that their behaviour has on others. When staff receive little feedback they tend to be self-critical or self-congratulatory as they are relying upon events rather than specific feedback to measure their performance and impact. The following passage highlights this.

Jane's manager had not ever told her that he found her too inclined to agree with him. It was not until the third time that she had been overlooked for promotion that her manager eventually told her that he felt she lacked decisiveness and was not assertive enough to be a

senior manager. Jane was left wondering why she had not been given this feedback during a three year period. Unless she had asked for verbal feedback, the only feedback she would have received indirectly was the fact that she was being overlooked.

Feedback is important to the on-going development of learners. Many situations involve the integration of knowledge, skills and behaviours in complex and often stressful environments with time and service pressures on teachers and learners.

Integrating feedback within an overall approach that emphasizes on-going reflective practice helps learners to develop the capacity to critically evaluate their own and others' performance, to self-monitor and move towards professional autonomy. Learners don't often recognise feedback and may often complain that they haven't received any. Sometimes it is not recognised as feedback when a lecturer comments on a student's work or explains to them where they should direct their efforts in reports or assignments.

1.3 Cost -Benefit Analysis of Feedback Provision.

Appropriate and regular feedback is of immeasurable value to Management, Staff and Students alike, not least in the following ways;

-Self image is enhanced and the individual feels that he/she is a part of something and not apart from something.

-The person's role as manager, teacher or student is perceived to be respected and valued.

-As self-esteem grows, so too does productivity, because goals are more clearly defined, and the attainment of those goals, more fulsomely rewarded.

-Time management is more acutely addressed, as individuals become more empowered to make the best use of their productive hours.

- Interpersonal relationships can be more clearly evaluated, and consequently strengthened.

- Students can better track their own academic progress or lack of same, feedback being an essential part of managing performance.

- Individuals can more positively deal with rejection.

- Others are encouraged to believe in you and your abilities.

- Higher grades are more easily attainable, and areas of self development can be more precisely identified.

However the costs of poor feedback may result in the following;

-Feeling of dislocation, affecting one's overall sense of responsibility, and in consequence, productivity levels.

-Resentment, stemming from the perception of not being fully valued or respected for one's contribution.

-Lower levels of self esteem adversely affect motivation and in turn weaken focus on goals, and their attainment.

-Talent is not seen to be encouraged, or rewarded and abilities are rarely if ever maximised.

-Grades are diminished.

-Drop out rates may increase

1.4 Feedback needs to be *SMART*

In all organisations, academia being no exception, success is very clearly results driven. Feedback, if it means to optimise resources (staff and students) and maximise output (job satisfaction, and more effective teaching and learning) needs to be *SMART*. The feedback needs to be Specific: it needs to address the actual person and the immediate issue. It should not be general if it is to be effective. It needs to be Measurable: where active completion of a task or response to instruction is tracked. It must be Acceptable: terms of reference are clearly communicated and understood between sender and receiver. It must be Realistic: the desired effect of information transmission between management, staff and students must be based on real potential and limitations, and not aspirational. It must be Time framed: feedback is extremely powerful when it is received at the right time, and acted on within a certain duration.

So the feedback must be targeted, personalised and earmarked for maximum benefit. It must reach it's recipient(s) at the correct time, to ensure greatest impact. It must be delivered in the right language. The advice/instruction etc. must be transmitted in simple direct language so that the recipient can more easily relate to and respond more enthusiastically. The feedback must be a clear communication so that the recipient does not have to ask questions about it. The detail must be honest and correct, otherwise it will be of little value. There should be no room for unnecessary elaboration and the issue(s) should be addressed in a forthright and precise manner. There must be a clear proposal in the feedback that is adhered to. The communication must be transmitted in the right *mood*, it must be empathetic where necessary and solemn when required.

2.1 Receiving feedback

Sometimes feedback is not received positively by learners, and fear of this can inhibit teachers giving regular face-to-face replies. People's responses to criticism, however constructively it is framed, can vary. Learners often discount their ability to take responsibility for their learning, and their responses to feedback itself in negative ways, including anger, denial, blaming or rationalization. You can help to prepare learners to receive feedback by providing opportunities for them to practice. The aim of developing an open dialogue between the provider and recipient is so that both parties are relaxed and able to focus on listening, engaging with the learning points and messages, and developing these into action points for future development.

2.2 Providing formal feedback

Formal feedback can be provided in a number of ways. Observations over a period of time or for specific purposes, e.g. appraisal, at the end of interviews, exam scripts, project presentations, report assessments etc., are typical situations when formal feedback should occur. Informing someone who does things correctly is as important as offering guidance to others to perform better.

If feedback has been provided regularly, then the formal feedback sessions should not contain any surprises for the learners. Feedback can be given on a one-to-one basis, to small groups and whole classes. There are methods of encouraging others to engage with feedback. One should always encourage informal questions and discussions and avoid jargon. In addition to this, it is essential to invite comments and suggestions, so that you can exchange information and experiences. It is often important to call people together and explain the reasons for change for example and how it will affect them. Inform people on issues which affect them. Congratulate people on doing outstanding job. While talking to people in feedback sessions, emphasise the importance of their ideas to strengthen the communication process

2.3 Barriers to giving effective feedback

The authors, Hesketh and Laidlaw (2002) identify a number of barriers to giving effective feedback:

- A fear of upsetting the learner or undermining the learner – teacher relationship.
- A fear of doing more harm than good.
- The learner being resistant or defensive when receiving criticism. Poor handling of a reaction to negative feedback can result in feedback being disregarded thereafter.
- Feedback being too generalized and not related to specific facts or observations.
- Feedback not giving proper guidance on how to rectify behaviour.
- Inconsistent feedback from multiple sources.
- A lack of respect for the source of feedback.
- Lecturers don't realise the importance of feedback.
- Lecturers not trained to provide feedback

Many lecturers may fail to give meaningful feedback to students because they have not been trained how to do it effectively. Most have never considered it important or essential and find it very time consuming or are not aware of its benefits and motivating impact.

3.1 Case Study
Attitude to the Customer

Consider the following which was written over thirty years ago in respect to customer relations and communications from a sales perspective.

> - *A customer is not dependent on us; we are dependent on him/her.*
> - *A customer is not an interruption to our work – they are the purpose of it.*
> - *We are not doing him/her a favour by serving him/her – S/he is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so.*
> - *A customer is not someone to argue with or match wits with.*
> - *Nobody ever won an argument with a customer.*

> - *A customer is someone who brings us his/her wants.*
> - *It is our job to handle them profitably to him/her and to ourselves.*
> (**Marks and Spencer's Trading Policy**)

If we dealt with our students under the same policy, would we be in a better position today?

Here is a more familiar comment that we are used to receiving from External Bodies

Like last year, students felt that marks and feedback on continuous assessment work was either not provided at all, or provided so late that they could not use the feedback to improve future continuous assessment. I think this is a significant weakness, as early feedback of poor continuous assessment marks can be used to alert students about their difficulties, and also feedback has an important formative aspect which is currently not fully harnessed. This applies also for the final year project.

Continuous assessment marks need to be provided as soon as possible, and the stated tendency that students who have achieved 40% in their continuous assessment marks sometimes "switch off" after they have achieved a pass mark needs to be tackled head-on - it is a depressing thought that some students strive to barely pass, everybody should be striving to achieve good grades, albeit that not everybody can achieve their goals. (External examiner, 2011)

3.2 Conclusions

Lecturing staff and indeed management staff need to be trained in providing feedback and in the benefits of receiving and providing it to their students and colleagues in order to enhance the learning environment and improve performance. Timely feedback is essential and must be communicated effectively to the receiver. Without proper feedback a vacuum is created which may result in poor grades, lack of interest and loss of strategy and direction. The benefits of effective feedback provision are invaluable and undeniable, while the costs of same are negligible. The emphasis that external bodies place on quality of education which depends highly on feedback needs to be responded to more appropriately. Some staff have excelled in this area however, such staff stand out in terms of their successful achievements in student results but need to be rewarded in suitable ways by their own managers in order to encourage others to achieve similar effects. An insignificant but important comment from students relates to the breakdown of marks for a module. Some staff fail to notify students of this and therefore those students do not know where to place extra input when it comes to their own performance. A more common situation arises when staff fail to notify students of the contents of a module or the learning outcomes, leading to a situation where students don't understand why they are studying certain material and it's relevance to their overall learning. These issues are quite basic to address but experience shows differently. Feedback provision must be rooted in some finely honed communication skills, in order to ask and answer some fundamental, but vital questions. Moreover, a more formalised and scientific approach to solving the perennial problem of defective feedback has to be emphasized and duly adopted, by educational institutions. In terms of costs, feedback is a very marginal *overhead* demanding merely a dedicated time, and some insignificant transmission costs. The argument for effective and regular feedback is quite emphatic-the benefits far outweigh the costs, particularly in the medium to long term.

References
http://studentbranding.com/tips-for-giving-and-receiving-feedback/