Constructive Feedback: A Rare Art of Managers

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ABSTRACT

Constructive feedback unarguably helps in the creation of self-awareness, clarification of expectations, building and maintenance of harmonious work relations, promotion of employees' engagements and enthusiasms, boosting performance and productivity, as well as promotion of efficiency and effectiveness of work among others. However, in the quest for an increased productivity and profitability, Managers are tempted to neglect building human capacity through constructive feedback. This ultimately results in high staff turnover, inefficiencies, industrial disputes and low productivity in organizations. This paper did a scholarly review of literature on why constructive feedback is rare among managers despite its inherent benefits. It concluded that most managers shy away from the art because of its cost implication, time consumption, lack of self-confidence, fear of confrontation and straining relationships, lack of feedback experience, and fear of appearing weak. The paper recommended that managers embrace the ideologies of the humanistic theory of management such as compassion and empathy as well as being genuinely committed to a whole-person growth and development towards optimal performance, growth and wellbeing of employees as well as organizational growth and prosperity.

Keywords: Feedback, Feedforward, Constructive feedback, Managers, Performance, Productivity,

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Introduction

Concept of Feedback in management

Feedback is the information, commendation or criticism, given in reaction to someone's or organization's performance for the purpose of making necessary adjustments and improving future performance and growth. However, Beqiri (2018) defines feedback as a way of reinforcing positive behavior and discussing solutions for areas of improvement. Also, Marthouret and Sigvardsson (2016), define feedback as one of the most prevalent intervention in the field of organizational behavior management and is a highly popular invention in the domain of applied behavior analysis. Feedback has two objectives: to appreciate the good/right things with logical explanations, identify the bad/wrong things and provide options to change them. It is about active listening or/and note taking, objective analysis, and then strategizing for better performance. It provides commendations or/and positive criticisms and allows for a change to improve concentration and future performance. Feedbacks are given by managers, supervisors, peers, customers, staff members and the institution (Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 2018; Flanagan, 2018).

In the context of this paper, feedback is a management control strategy to timely identify derailment in employees' performance with a view to help them return back on the track of expected level of performance. This suggests that there must have been a clearly defined expectation which is mutually understood by both the manager and the subordinates through effective communication. This predetermined expectation serves as the yardstick for measuring performance in a transparent and objective manner. Also, the definition connote that there is a review of employees' performance by the manager where the actual performance is evaluated against established standard (expectation) to determine and make a pronouncement on the degree to which performance meets expectation. The outcome of this measurement may be in form of commendation and rewards for positive feedbacks or criticism and punishment for negative feedbacks.

Feedback and feedforward

As explained above, feedback is the comment on the performance of someone. This means, the act has been done either good or warranting positive or negative comment respectively. However, feedforward is a comment or suggestion for the future endeavors using the experience and knowledge or lessons from the past (feedback). When an employee receives feedback, they get information about how they have performed on their tasks. Feedforward is the reverse exercise of feedback. It is the process of replacing positive or negative feedback with future-oriented solutions. In simple terms, it means

focusing on the future instead of the past. It the process of using the lessons from the past to shape a brighter future through suggestions of better courses of actions for better performances and outcomes.

Types of feedback in management

According to the federation university (2021), there are seven major types of feedback in literature. These are formal, informal, formative, summative, student peer, student self and constructive feedbacks. While the first six types mentioned mostly relates to students, constructive feedback is of more relevance to employee-manager relationship. There are four sub-types of constructive feedback. They are positive, negative, positive feed-forward and negative feed-forward feedbacks. While Positive feedback involves making comments about past performance of someone dwelling on performance that meets expectation or successful with an encouragement for continuation Negative feedback is an admonition or corrective comments about past performance which fall short of expectation and should not be repeated. Positive feed-forward feedback is a comment about future performance dwelling on the attitudes, behaviours or/and actions that will improve performance in the future. Whereas, Negative feed-forward feedback is a corrective comment about future performance focusing on attitudes, behaviours or/and actions that should be avoided in the future in order to meet expectations. Other types of feedbacks in literature include the automatic and carefully planned feedback (Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 2018). The automatic feedback, just as the name implies, connotes spontaneous comments about employee's performance while the carefully planned feedback is a formal feedback officially given at specific intervals.

Concept of constructive feedback in management

Constructive feedback is a compassionate feedback given to individual employee with the aim of identifying strengths and weaknesses and deliberately planning performance enhancement strategies for the employee to overcome identified weaknesses (Corporate Finance Institute (CFI), 2020). Constructive or strength-based feedback is an information mechanism for assessment of performance with the aim of motivating or controlling the staff to an acceptable level of performance/behavior. This mechanism require a technical ability to drive the message home without raising emotional resistance from the staff as this may jeopardize the purpose of the feedback (Gallagher, 2007). The feedback is very crucial to managers/leaders in order to ensure all staff perform/behave in an acceptable standard necessary for the success of the organization. Therefore, constructive feedback comes with positive intentions and it is used as a supportive communication tool to address specific issues or concerns. It entails providing useful information and, importantly, suggestions that contribute to personal and corporate growth,

better performances, better process or improved behaviors. It provides genuine encouragement, support, corrections and direction to the person receiving it in a compassionate manner. There are four types of constructive feedback as earlier discussed. They are positive, negative, positive feed-forward and negative feed-forward feedbacks.

Constructive feedback and the humanistic theory of management

The humanistic theory of management was developed in the 1960s by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Clark Moustakas. The theory states that people achieve their full potentials by moving from basic needs to self-actualization. The theory focuses on looking at the whole person concept stressing on freewill, self-efficacy and self-actualization which is sharp deviation from the conventional focus on the employees/individual dysfunctions. The theory therefore, help individuals to actualize their full potentials and maximize their wellbeing through assisted growth and development. It is a people-oriented approach to management where attention is shifted to human capacity development for productivity and profit maximization. The theory emphasizes the empathy, the dignity of human person and values as well as the creation and active nature of humans. Although it is based on the assumptions of empathy, congruence and unreserved positive regard. The humanistic theory of management centers on personal development and workplace growth through genuine identification and commitment to the needs of human resources. It is believed that this shift in focus will spur them to improved performance, wellbeing and profitability. It will also help develop a mutually beneficial employer-employee relationship and a cordial work environment. The demands of the humanistic theory of management underscores the relevance and importance of constructive feedback. As a practical fallout of the humanistic theory, constructive feedback also focuses on genuine whole-person growth and development towards optimal performance that meets manager's expectations as well as improve the wellbeing of the individual employee.

Modes of constructive feedback in management

In view of the sensitive nature of human beings to any actual and potential threats, the manner in which feedbacks are given, is a significant determinant of its outcome. Many managers sound rather harsh and inhumane when giving feedback, especially negative, to their subordinates. The subordinates also most times in their response deviate from the subject to the person in reaction to perceived threats in the feedback. This situation where both the manager and the subordinates fail to apply emotional intelligence or emotional quotient in the feedback process makes it counterproductive. In the work of Richard Gallagher on the way to give effective (strength-based) feedback, the author suggested a 'CANDID' approach. The word 'CANDID' is an acronym given by the author to represent

Compartmentalization, Asking assessment question, Normalizing the situation, Discussion in details, Incentivizing the outcome and De-emphasizing the encounter (Gallagher, 2007). The whole essence of this approach is to remove emotions and threats to human person from the feedback process.

Similarly, Flanagan (2017) in his work on giving and receiving feedback asserted that staff members, supervisors or the institution must be timely, have good intention, dialogue, secure mutual understanding, engage emotional intelligence as well as respect individual differences while engaging the feedback process. According to him, for constructive feedback to be effective, the process must give specific information for improvement, give clear expectation from the onset to serve as yardstick for performance measurement, have good intention of increasing staff efficiency and be unbiased, strengthen relationship, creating staff enthusiasm, building staff confidence and self-esteem, demonstrating care and compassion, staff engagement and involvement, as well as making the employee feel acknowledged. In essence, the whole process must be humane and focus on genuine growth for the employee for his/her own benefit and for the benefit of the organization. This position was also affirmed by Office of Personnel Management (OPM) (2018) in its policy on performance management where it placed emphasis on being specific, timely and humane in feedback process. Furthermore, the manager must avoid making hasty conclusions, overcome the temptation of looking for the extremes in performance, or making comparisons among staff performance. This is in addition to being emotionally intelligent, secure mutual understanding and respect for individual differences (Flanagan, 2017).

Cain (2019) in his own contribution to knowledge on how to make constructive feedback effective, emphasized the need for the person giving the feedback to be specific, prescriptive, positive, comprehensive and professional. Being specific is to be precise on the expectation and the performance of the employee while being prescriptive is to make definite suggestions to the employee for improved performance and growth. In the same vein, being positive connote that the manager must take a constructive posture, a stance and intention to make the employee a better person and not to condemn him for suboptimal performance. Being comprehensive connote that the feedback discussion must be detailed with the full participation of the employee. The employee must be allowed to bare his mind on all possible factors responsible for the outcome being analyzed. While the manager also give detailed explanation on better ways of achieving improved results. To be professional implies being skillful and emotionally intelligent in the management of the feedback process.

Feedback and constructive feedback

Feedback can either be constructive or destructive. Yasir and Sajid (2010) defines constructive feedback as a powerful instrument that facilitates the learner's professional and personal development. However, providing constructive feedback to employees is essential because it highlights how well they are performing and what improvements are needed for development. Beqiri (2018) opines that managers often feel nervous about providing constructive feedback because they want to avoid disheartening their employees. Well-delivered feedback should be educating and motivating rather than discouraging. However, destructive feedback is that tool used to hurt people's feelings. Managers with destructive feedback will usually tell employees that they are doing terrible job without telling them where they went wrong (Son, 2016).

The main point of departure between feedback and constructive feedback is the motive behind the comment/information. Feedback may just be an official demand for the purpose of assessment for promotion and other rewards for good performance or punishment for poor performance while constructive feedback is centered on the whole person wellbeing, human capacity improvement, individual and corporate growth and performance enhancement. Constructive feedback is done with care and the wellbeing of the person in focus not just the organizational productivity in mind. This intention must be genuine passion to encourage employee to grow and the process must be all-inclusive, transparent, unbiased, compassionate and devoid of emotional sentiments (Gorbatoy & Lane, 2018). Everyone requires feedback at some point, either as managers, workers, parents, friends or partners. It can be done at an informal level as things are unfolding and it can also be useful tool in a relationship. According to Locke (2021) majority (96%) in one survey think that negative feedback is helpful in getting better results. The same study revealed that 75 percent want positive feedback with helpful suggestions on improving, so as to encourage, motivate and help employees to build skills.

Principles of constructive feedback

The process of constructive feedback works on the basis of a number of characteristics. In many studies these characteristics or principles have advantages that can help in solving problems without offending the other person, changing behavior towards positivity, encouraging and supporting development, suggesting corrective measures, providing meaningful direction on the basis of logic and turning criticism into something constructive. Therefore, constructive feedback must be given in a productive, respectful way. Constructive feedback must possess features like being descriptive; honest; trust; timely; useful; motivating; respectful; clear; issue specific; solution oriented; supportive; strictly confidential; collaborative and informative; action oriented. On the other hand, destructive feedback

can be unhelpful, subjective, personal, likely to undermine some workers, judgmental, accusatory and likely to leave issues unresolved

Benefits of constructive feedback to organizations and individuals

Several studies have shown that constructive feedback is vital to effective teaching and learning for personal and professional development. Notable among such studies are those of Nyiramana (2017) and Hamid and Mahmood (2010). According to empirical evidences from the work of Nyiramana (2017), there is a significant positive relationship between constructive feedback and effective teaching and learning as well as quality education. Constructive feedback is critical for higher institutions of learning, hence they must shun any institutional culture that encourages unhelpful feedback and imbibe the culture of constructive feedback to ensure effective and sustainable educational quality enhancement. In another study by Nibras (2017), constructive feedback was found to reinforce learning thereby making it effective. These were confirmations of the findings of earlier works of Hamid and Mahmood (2010) which empirically found that there is a strong positive correlation between constructive feedback and teaching and learning in Pakistani Medical Schools. Constructive feedback has been described as the pillar of effective training and the most important feedback in simulation-based training (Walsh & Cohen, 2019).

The benefits of constructive feedback are too numerous to mention. This is because the intangible merits that imparts on the individual and corporate productivity and wellbeing are not quantifiable. Nevertheless, some of the benefits of constructive feedback in literature are creation of self-awareness, clarification of expectations, building and maintenance of harmonious work relations, promotion of employees' engagements and enthusiasms, boosting performance and productivity, as well as promotion of efficiency and effectiveness of work processes.

Constructive feedback promotes self-awareness of employees. The significance of constructive feedback to skill acquisition, motivation and morale, growth, wellbeing, productivity and success of the individual employee as well as the organization cannot be over-emphasized. According to Gorbatoy and Lane (2018), constructive feedback is vital to self-awareness, as well as individual and corporate growth and development. Individual employee get to discover themselves through constructive feedback. It helps to identify one's areas of strength and weaknesses as well as provide plausible suggestions to overcome one's weaknesses and become proficient thereby repositioning one greater benefits. This process of self-awareness unlocks employees' potentials and set them on the path of growth and improved standard of living and wellbeing. This in turn lead to employees' improved

morale, workplace harmony and improved productivity necessary for corporate growth and development.

Similarly, constructive feedback provides clear expectations for employees. Flanagan (2017) submitted that constructive feedback provides specific information for improvement, make expectation clear, increase efficiency, strengthen relationship, creates enthusiasm, build confidence and self-esteem, demonstrate care, secures employees' involvement and commitment to growth as well as makes employees feel acknowledged. This shows that constructive feedback demands that managers make expectations clear in terms of what is expected from the individual employee, the timeline to meet up the responsibility, the chain of command, and every other responsibility and actions expected from the employee. Constructive feedback helps organization to be explicit on what it is expected from their employees thereby guiding them in ensuring that the objective of the organization is given priority (Beqiri, 2018). This clear expectation serves as the basis for measuring performance as well as guide the employees in their routines. This require effective communication between the managers and the employees and when this is properly done, the probability of the employee performing optimally is increased. This assertion is in agreement with the Pygmalion theory which confirmed that communication promotes subordinates performances (Livingston, 2003). Generally, successful relationships in all human endeavors can be enhanced by communication (Gallagher, 2018). Beqiri (2018) in support of this position asserts that constructive feedback helps in clarifying expectations of employees as well as giving them guidance and a sense of purpose.

Also, constructive feedback creates and maintains harmonious work environment. This is because some of the demands of constructive feedback are compassion, effective communication, involvement and mutual understanding. All these create a pleasant and loving work environment which strengthens relationships between Management and staff. This will reduce industrial disputes and its attendant distractions that adversely affect productivity. Constructive feedback according to Dontigney (2021) will result in reducing tensions between team, especially in a work place. When individual's interpersonal problems are properly addressed it can improve team relations.

Constructive feedback also provides a platform for the improvement of employee's performance. Generally, employees, like every individual, will like to progress in their personal and professional life. By providing employees with constructive feedback, managers giving positive reinforcement to boost their performance and assisting in their progression. This also shows that the organization cares about employees' development (Begini, 2018). Having measured actual performance against

expectation, employees have the opportunity of seeing clearly any derailment which require improvement in future performance. This clarity of process spurs employees to taking necessary steps towards a better performance in future. When this is continuously done, employees' efficiency increase steadily and move towards perfection thereby increasing corporate productivity and profitability.

In addition to these, constructive feedback creates employees' enthusiasm. The sincerity and compassion of the manager motivates employees to joyfully pursue after personal and professional improvement knowing fully well that such improvement will lead to greater rewards and improved wellbeing. Furthermore, the improved performance brought about by constructive feedback builds confidence and self-esteem in the employees. This improved confidence and self-esteem also motivates the employee towards better performance. This is in agreement with the Abraham Maslow's needs theory of motivation. Also the compassion shown by managers of constructive feedback demonstrates genuine care which helps overcome negative emotional reactions of employees to feedback as well as secures employees' involvement and commitment to their personal and corporate growth and development. Constructive feedback, especially when it is positive, makes employees feel their efforts and other contributions to the success of the organization are well acknowledged. This provides further motivation for better performance in future in line with Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation. It also increases the chance that employees will be free to share new ideas that can lead to the progress of the organization (Dogtigney, 2021).

Cost effectiveness is another benefit of constructive feedback. Employee turnover costs money. But by promoting positive feedback in a workplace, turnover can be reduced. Most forms of positive feedback require no direct capital investment; the manager just need to sacrifice few moments (Dontigney, 2021).

Why is constructive feedback rare among managers?

Managers are responsible for the processes of getting activities completed efficiently with and through other people and setting and achieving the firm's goals through the execution of four basic management functions: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. One of a manager's main roles in an organization is to provide employees with both negative and positive feedback when appropriate. Yet so many managers avoid giving feedback to their employees, thereby preventing them to know how they are doing. Employees need constant feedback to learn how they can improve at their jobs and to feel accomplished about their successes. Some of the reasons in literature why constructive

feedback is rare among managers include cost implication, time consuming, lack of self-confidence, fear of confrontation and straining relationships, lack of feedback experience, and fear of appearing weak.

Constructive feedback is not cheap as it requires training of people in the art with its attendant cost. Managers are mostly concerned with efficiency in the use of resources to achieve organization's goals. They targets minimum investment for maximum returns. In view of this stance, they are most likely going to get 'already-made' human resources to reduce training investment while obtaining optimal output from them. Managers are mostly concerned with productivity and most times, at the expense of human capacity development. Human performance is however known to be complex and dynamic (Gorbatoy & Lane, 2018). It is complex because it is influenced by several factors including feedback (Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 2018). It is dynamic because it responds to change in the environment such as political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, legal and ethical changes. The complexity and dynamic nature of human capacity development makes it a continuous demand and expensive. Consequently, managers are tempted to seek alternative routes and shortcuts to efficiency and productivity.

Similarly, harvesting the benefits of constructive feedback requires time and patience. Managers must be genuinely committed to the growth of the human resources over a period of time before harvesting optimal output from them. Constructive feedback requires identification of staff weaknesses through transparent and unbiased feedback, engagement of the employees on ways to grow and improve performance, compassion, meeting employees' needs, mutual understanding, securing employees cooperation and enthusiasm as well as making several investments in the building and nurturing of the employees. Most managers do not have this patience and tolerance required by constructive feedback, hence they are tempted to seek for 'ready-made' employees.

Poorly managed feedback can cause confrontations and strain relationships and be counter-productive. Bechtel, McGee, Huitema and Dickinson (2015) opines that, the outcome of feedback might be very individual due to culture, life experiences of the feedback receiver, personality, yet, the overall thought of getting feedback is strongly valuable. However, based on Ende's principles, feedback should be descriptive and non-judgmental. This situation rather than enhancing capacity and increasing productivity and efficiency will cause frictions, inefficiencies and reduced productivity, hence many managers shy away from it. As a manager, sometime negative feedback on employees' performance

may be inevitable in the workplace. However, many managers fear that their employees may dislike them, act out in anger and threaten to quit or shun them if they give negative feedback on their performance. Nevertheless, managers need not to fear confrontation, especially, when feedback is given in appropriate manner. Manager can take control of the situation by enhancing their emotional intelligence capacity and turning a "confrontational" situation into a simple conversation. Furthermore, it is essential to prevent confrontation by separating issues from persons as well as being compassionate and genuine in building employees' capacity and wellbeing. This is in addition to giving regular feedback on their performances in the workplace.

According to Heron (2017), the number one reason preventing managers to give feedback to employees is due to lack of self-confidence. Some managers may not have gotten opportunity to receive training the right trainings in management. You can only give out what you know. A bold manager holding position of authority should be able to give both negative and positive feedback to employees. But many managers simply don't know how to give feedback.

Fear of appearing weak is another reason why managers shy away from constructive feedback. Some managers don't give feedback to employees because they don't want to appear to be weak. Such managers fear that being compassionate and involving the employee in conversations over their performance may cause indiscipline in the workplace. Nevertheless, Zenger and Folkman (2017) opines that offering employees praise is just as important as offering them negative feedback. However, most employees would want to know what to do for improvement. Hence, in a study carried out by Harvard Business Review, 57% of participants stated that they preferred constructive feedback while 43% participants preferred praise.

However, human resources have been proved over and again as the most valuable asset of any organization and worth being invested in. More so, a 'ready-made' employee today will definitely become inefficient and irrelevant in the nearest future as a result of the constant change in the environment and human needs. Therefore, managers with foresight embrace constructive feedback to nurture employees to excellence for individual and corporate benefits.

Conclusion

There is a need for the development of constructive feedback skills in managers as well as entrenching feedback culture in organizations for optimal performance. Giving and receiving feedback require structured curiosity to communicate the message while watering down emotional resistance in order to get the desired result of molding the staff to perform optimally according to required standard. In the

face of perceived wrong doing, the manager will doubtless be tempted to be furious at the erring staff rather than being constructively curious. This is in line with Richard Gallagher's submission (Gallagher, 2007). Therefore, skills for constructive curiosity need to be consciously developed by every leader. In giving feedback, all questioning, reflection and clarification must focus on the behavior (actions) and not the personality behind the action. It must also be specific and done timely to avoid losing its relevance and value. Moreover, receiving feedback require active listening and non-verbal communication. Therefore, managers need to develop capacity in constructive feedback, focusing in areas, such as: empathy/compassion, listening skills and questioning skill.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, it is important to make the following recommendations for managers to perform better in their managerial function of subordinate supervision using the tool of constructive feedback:

i.   Every organization should organize periodic constructive feedback training for its managers through seminars and short courses;

ii.   Organizations should embrace the principles of humanitarian theory by building an organization culture of empathy and genuine commitment to whole-person growth and development using the tool of constructive feedback and motivation strategies;

iii.   Organizations should include constructive feedback in their organizational policy including putting mechanism in place to checkmate and punish overzealous managers and deter them from engaging in oppressive conducts such as bullying, threatening and suppressing of subordinates in the course of giving feedbacks;

iv.   Organizations should engage in periodic organization-wide studies to identify how the firm is fairing in their management function of giving feedbacks and enhancing personal and professional growth and capacity building of employees with a view to making necessary adjustments in policy and actions; and

v.   Academic institutions should engage in empirical studies on constructive feedback to further gain more insights into its cost and benefits as well as other interesting intricacies.

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