



How to Use Feedback to Succeed in the Workplace

Countless studies have documented the significant career benefits of collecting feedback from colleagues about our business performance and approaches. The concept is not new, and the value is real. So why do many well-intentioned professionals fail to take full advantage of this potential competitive edge? In terms of talent management, why don't leaders give their high potential employees access to candid insights about their strengths and weaknesses as perceived by their co-workers and clients? That information could have a much stronger impact on their ability to succeed than attending another conference or webinar. Yes, the feedback process requires some effort. And it can feel awkward at first. However, the career benefits of gathering specific, meaningful and ongoing feedback far outweigh the challenges.

I've always believed that statement. But in the last year I've seen remarkable proof that gathering feedback is the powerful (and often overlooked) fuel that accelerates careers. I've reviewed real-life case studies about inadvertent behaviors and attitudes that can stall careers.

1. Why targeted feedback is essential

- Many people I spoke with about this topic in recent months had the same response: "Sure, I get feedback from the boss in my annual review." That's important, but it's just the tip of the iceberg. The kind of feedback that can have a genuine impact on your career is deeper and broader. It goes beyond measuring how well you met the goals or the deadlines; it uncovers how your colleagues feel about working with you, how you communicate and collaborate with them, how they perceive your ability to handle stress and adversity.

Admittedly, getting feedback on these intangible skills is a little more challenging than looking at numbers on a spreadsheet. But don't we all know the brilliant people in the office who are repeatedly passed over for promotions? Many times, their lack of intangible skills is the primary culprit. Despite their intelligence, they simply aren't perceived by their supervisors as "management material." If they could just get honest feedback from their co-workers, they might discover important information to help them avoid years of frustration and self-doubt. Professionals trying to get ahead tend to concentrate on adding degrees and certifications, but feedback is actually the critical element they need.

2. How to get quality feedback

Thankfully, there are plenty of ways to ask for professional feedback. Whether you choose formal surveys offered by a research firm or informal conversations with colleagues, the goal is to build that feedback loop into all of your work relationships. Think about gathering richer data by being more specific with your questions. "How am I doing?" probably won't generate an answer with as much value as asking someone how you rate on your ability to connect, engage and build relationships with others. By asking multiple people the same question, you may start to see a pattern in the responses.

Another point to consider is whether your team members will feel comfortable being candid with their comments about your performance or that of the others in your group (peers, supervisors or direct reports). To move beyond polite banter and discover areas with potential for improvement (the main point of this process), you may need to conduct an anonymous survey. Many formal assessments use that approach, and a wide range of ready-made surveys can be purchased at varying price points. Or you can always set up your own online questionnaire using a site like Survey Monkey. Bottom line: feedback is very important, but the right type of feedback is essential for success.

3. What to do with feedback

As I worked with different corporate groups over the last year, I frequently found professionals who appeared to be staunch advocates of gathering feedback. Many of their office shelves held binders filled with survey results and personality assessments. But having the information isn't the same thing as using the information -- and that's often the hitch. A new crop of questions emerges. What do the findings really mean? How do I apply what I've learned to make a positive impact on my career? Once I make changes, how do I know it's working? Gathering feedback is really just the beginning.

The next step is interpreting the comments you receive. Do you see a clear pattern in the responses to each question? If not, you may have identified an area where you could benefit by adjusting your behavior. For example, some people might perceive you as coming on too strong, while others see you as energetic and passionate. While the goal isn't about making everyone happy all the time, you might watch for clues to determine when a softer approach will actually be more effective. In addition, carefully analyze your respondents' diplomatic comments to find the small nugget of feedback that could be having a negative impact on your career success. Identifying those subtle nuances may provide you with the greatest opportunities for development.

Once you've interpreted the feedback, move forward to make a difference. Figure out how to improve by embedding and applying new attitudes and behaviors on the job. Develop specific strategies and tactics, building an implementation plan with resources and milestones. Be deliberate in your efforts, and seek out support from others to help reach your goals.

Acting on the feedback we gather -- adjusting our behaviors, attitudes and approaches to improve our perceptions in the workplace -- is the primary differentiator between those who rise quickly through an organization and those who seem to be stuck. And how will we know if those adjustments are having a positive impact? More feedback. It should be an ongoing process that becomes part of our regular business routine.

The key here is about taking action. Telling an employee that he or she isn't working well as part of a team may, in fact, be accurate information. But it's only helpful if the manager has concrete suggestions for how to improve. I've heard many success stories from managers who use action plans and "fast fixes" to guide their employees in making meaningful changes with positive results. Feedback alone isn't enough; it's how we respond.