Quantum Workplace

A Practical Guide to

Giving & Receiving Employee Feedback

With a Growth Mindset

Contents

Introduction

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Feedback is the broccoli of conversations. It's not very appetizing and we'd prefer something else if possible, but deep down we know that ultimately it's good for us.

Marc Effron
Publisher, Talent Quarterly

Feedback:
It's uncomfortable.
It's awkward.
It's terrifying.
It's essential.

We all know feedback is helpful. Employees crave it. Managers rely on it to improve and reward employee performance. Organizations depend on the exchange of feedback to grow employees and leaders, improve engagement, and retain top talent.

So why do we resist it? Why is it so difficult to give and take? And how can we improve and get the most out of this valuable but painful thing called feedback?

In this ebook, we'll:

- Explore the challenges of giving and receiving feedback

- Seek to understand the perspective of both the giver and receiver

- Provide guidance on how to approach feedback

Whether you find yourself giving or receiving feedback, you'll benefit most by reading this ebook in its entirety, so you have a shared understanding of both sides of the feedback table.

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The Biggest Mistake in Employee Feedback

What's more important: Being able to give feedback or being able to receive it?

Let's turn to Google. Using Google's keyword tool, you can see how many Google searches a phrase gets on average each month. Here's what it shows about people searching for how to give feedback and how to receive it:

GOOGLE SEARCH TERM	AVERAGE MONTHLY SEARCHES
how to give feedback	1,600
how to receive feedback	210
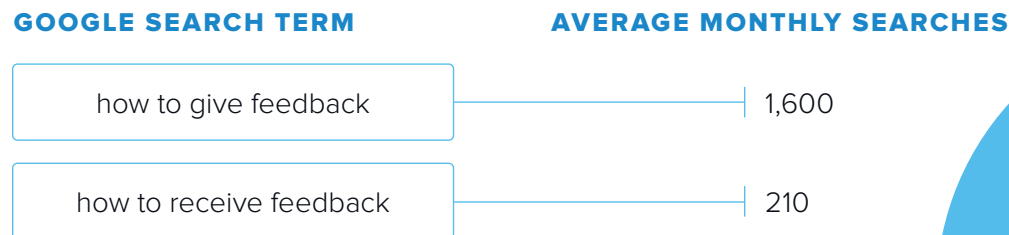
The answer is clear...or is it?

World-renowned behavioral scientist, Jack Zenger, and globally recognized expert in psychometrics, Joe Folkman, point out in their article "Feedback: The Leadership Conundrum" that, while traditionally nearly all the development focus is on the feedback giver, the receiver is in complete control of the outcome.

A common misconception is that the feedback giver is in a position of power. That the giver's ability to present feedback is the most significant factor in the success of a feedback interaction. This is likely because the giver is often a manager, who is typically viewed as being in a position of control. However, the onus actually falls more heavily on the receiver's ability to understand, accept, and take action on the feedback.

> A common misconception is that the feedback giver is in a position of power.

Zenger and Folkman suggest,

"The provider of feedback can say all the right words at the right time. However, the success of the interaction is ultimately in the hands of the receiver… the fact remains that what goes on emotionally and intellectually with the receiver is what really counts."

So is giving feedback important? Of course! Both the giver and receiver contribute to the feedback interaction. **But at the end of the day, the most underrated and ignored feedback skill is receiving it.**

As shown in the Google Search stats above, from a development standpoint, people are 7.6 times more likely to work on giving feedback than on receiving it. It's time to even that out. It's time to stop ignoring the other end of the feedback conversation.

That's why in this ebook we're going to start with what is perhaps the most important element of feedback—receiving it.

People are
7.6x more likely
to work on giving feedback than on receiving it.

Receiving
Feedback

Why Receiving Feedback Isn't Easy

Before you can work on being more receptive to feedback, it is important to first understand why you might resist feedback. Getting feedback can be uncomfortable, awkward, and even painful, despite the fact that it's usually given with the intent to be helpful, can improve our ability to get along with others, and advance our careers. Why is this? In this section, we'll examine three major reasons we resist feedback.

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Your Ego

Ego has gotten a bad rep. But the truth is everyone has an ego, big or small. Having an ego doesn't mean you have a big head. Simply defined, an ego is a person's sense of self-esteem or self-importance.

Consider these stats from executive coach and author, Marshall Goldsmith:

- 70% of us believe we're in the top 10% of our peer group.

- 82% of us believe we're in the top 20%.

- 98.5% of us believe we're in the top half.

You see the problem with these numbers? The fact is that we can't all be in the top 50 percent — it's basic math.

Feedback can threaten our self-perception, our ego. As Goldsmith states in his interview with *Talent Quarterly*, "It is very hard to face the reality of our own existence." He goes on to include "the reality of our performance."

Rather than examine our shortcomings, it is easier to play the role of a victim and blame the feedback giver. It is easier for us to be angry instead of depressed. We avoid feedback because it inflicts pain on our ego.

If we seek positive feedback only to boost our ego, then we miss the opportunity to receive valuable, corrective feedback that can help us grow.

"…the more we focus on maintaining our self-esteem, the more meaningless and less adaptive self-esteem becomes…Success is not about thinking highly of yourself, but persuading others to think highly of you. Conversely, people who ignore what others think of them and who try 'just to be themselves' will only be winners in their own imagination."

Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Robert Hogan, Ph.D. "The Psychology of Negative Feedback: Personality, Coachability, and Career Success"

> "
> **It is very hard to face the reality of our own performance.**

Your Brain

Let's dig deeper and examine the neuroscience behind why feedback makes us feel threatened. When we encounter something new, our brain seeks to minimize danger and maximize reward. If the new information or situation is perceived as dangerous, the brain goes into threat response mode, also known as "fight or flight." This is our body's primitive, automatic, stress response that prepares us to fight or flee from attack, harm, or threat to our survival.

Leading research on the social nature of the brain, presented by David Rock in "Managing With the Brain in Mind," has found that social situations can also trigger the threat response. Specifically, our perception of five qualities (status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness) can activate either a threat or reward response. This is well known as the SCARF model.

By becoming more self-aware and understanding our reactions, we can proactively prevent, control, and shift our threat response to a reward response. Next, let's examine each of the qualities that can elicit a threat response.

SCARF Model
Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
Fairness

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STATUS

What is it?

Status is our perceived importance relative to others. In social interactions, our brain works to assess whether our status is being threatened or rewarded, or rather enhanced or diminished. Biologically, our brains are programmed to care about status because it impacts our survival.

How does it impact our reaction to feedback?

When we receive praise or view feedback as a reward, our perception of status increases. However, when receiving negative or corrective feedback, our perception of status feels threatened. This is why performance reviews, 360 feedback, and feedback conversations can provoke a threat response. In fact, even the phrase, "Can I give you some feedback?" can elicit a threat response, even though the receiver doesn't know if the feedback is positive or negative.

How can we use it to our advantage?

Transition your mindset. View feedback as a positive opportunity, an opportunity to improve. Believe the feedback giver's intentions are to help. Shifting to a learning attitude, where we believe our status will be improved, can trigger a reward response, instead of a threat.
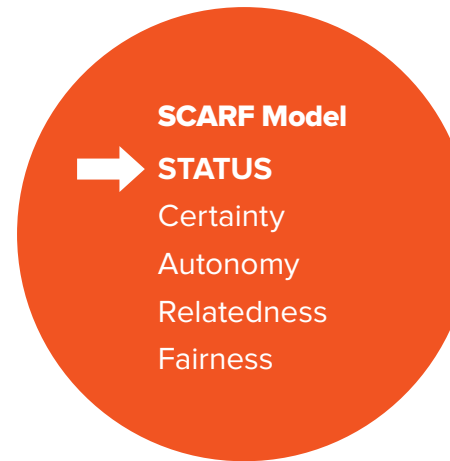
CERTAINTY

What is it?

Certainty is our ability to predict the future. Our brains crave familiarity. With it, brains conserve energy by going into autopilot. When we experience ambiguity or confusion, it creates tension in our minds. Too much uncertainty distracts us and can lead us to panic or make bad decisions.

How does it impact our reaction to feedback?

Feedback is an interaction, a communication. And just like any communication, feedback isn't always clear. When we don't understand why we're receiving the feedback, what the feedback means, or what impact the feedback could have on our future, this elicits a threat response.

How can we use it to our advantage?

If feedback threatens your certainty, seek clarity. Seek understanding. The better you understand the feedback given to you, the easier it is for you to move to a place of certainty and use the feedback for good.

SCARF Model

Status

CERTAINTY

Autonomy

Relatedness

Fairness

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AUTONOMY

What is it?

Autonomy is the level of control we feel over our lives. We want options. We want the freedom to make decisions. When we perceive our autonomy is reduced, it releases a threat response in our brain.

How does it impact our reaction to feedback?

When we receive feedback on how to do our work, such as processes or guidelines to follow, our autonomy feels attacked, like we have less control and less freedom.

How can we use it to our advantage?

If feedback threatens your autonomy, seek to understand the "why" behind the "how." Processes and guidelines usually have purpose, such as increasing quality or efficiency of work. Reframe feedback that threatens your autonomy and focus on how it will impact your success. In addition, focus on the opportunity for autonomy within the guidelines or processes you're given. Where do you have options? Where do you have more autonomy?

SCARF Model

Status

Certainty

➡ **AUTONOMY**

Relatedness

Fairness
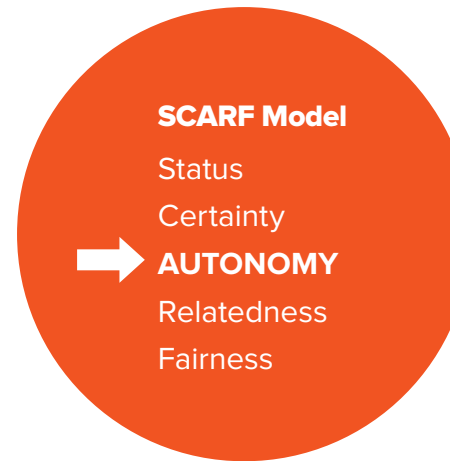
RELATEDNESS

What is it?

Relatedness is our sense of safety with others. In every interaction, our brain tries to identify the other party as a friend or foe. Can this person be trusted? Does she understand me? Will he show me compassion? Feeling trust and empathy from others depends on whether or not we perceive them to be part of the same social group. When we don't feel an element of "sameness," our brain produces a threat response.

How does it impact our reaction to feedback?

When our safety or sense of trust is threatened, we are less receptive to feedback. We question the intent of the feedback giver. This can especially be true of feedback from people outside of our social group. If you perceive your feedback giver as an "other," it's easier to feel threatened by the feedback. If hierarchies or teams have clear divisions that communicate "otherness," relatedness is more likely to be at risk.

How can we use it to our advantage?

When engaging in a feedback interaction, remind yourself of the social connection you have with the feedback giver. What evidence from past interactions point toward a trusting and empathetic relationship? When you have a strong social connection, the brain releases oxytocin, which disarms the threat response. If the relationship is new, remind yourself that building trust and goodwill takes time and repeated social interactions.

SCARF Model

Status
Certainty
Autonomy
➡ **RELATEDNESS**
Fairness

FAIRNESS

What is it?

Fairness is the sense of being respected and treated equally, especially compared to other people. When our brain perceives something to be unfair, it creates a threat response leading to hostility and diminishing trust.

How does it impact our reaction to feedback?

If we believe the feedback we're given is biased or the feedback giver's expectations are unfair, our brain activates a threat response and makes us less receptive to feedback.

How can we use it to our advantage?

Start by understanding this feedback interaction is about you, not others. Block destructive thoughts comparing yourself to others. Consider that other people who exhibit the same behavior are likely receiving the same feedback. Most importantly, seek understanding and clarity around the expectations for your performance.

SCARF Model

Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
➡ **FAIRNESS**

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Your Fear

When you hear the words, "Can I give you some feedback?" where does your mind go? Do you expect receiving feedback to be a positive experience? Or do you anticipate the interaction will be negative? Despite the fact that feedback can be positive or negative (and that even negative feedback can have positive ends), our minds typically expect that receiving feedback will be a negative experience.

So when we hear those words, "Can I give you some feedback?" we tend to operate from a position of fear.

In "Feedback: The Leadership Conundrum," Zenger and Folkman studied which factors can increase a person's willingness to receive corrective feedback. They found that reducing individual fear has nearly 3 times more the impact than improving the skills of the feedback giver.
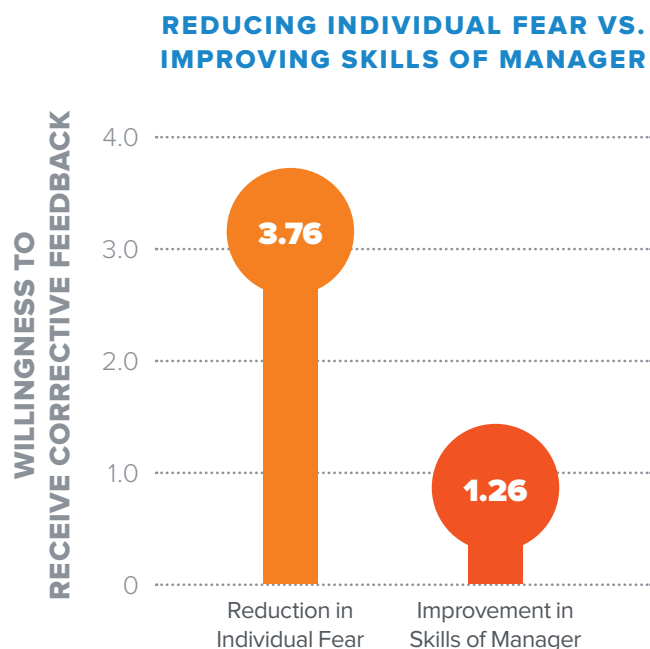
> " Even though the skills of a manager are helpful, fear trumps the manager's skill in delivering the feedback.
>
> *Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman*
> *"Feedback: The Leadership Conundrum"*

REDUCING INDIVIDUAL FEAR VS. IMPROVING SKILLS OF MANAGER

WILLINGNESS TO RECEIVE CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

	Reduction in Individual Fear	Improvement in Skills of Manager
Value	3.76	1.26

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The Do's & Don'ts of Receiving Feedback

Now that you understand the reasons you might be resistant to feedback, let's get down to the nitty-gritty tactics of receiving feedback well.

| DO	DON'T
Acknowledge feedback is painful but valuable	Close yourself off from corrective or negative feedback
Recognize no one is perfect	Only seek feedback to boost your ego
View both positive and corrective feedback as a gift	Turn the feedback giver into a villain
Understand that giving feedback is difficult too	Allow ego, threat responses, fear, or personality prevent you from hearing feedback
Understand, recognize, and overcome your triggered reactions or threat responses to feedback	Try to prove who is right and who is wrong
Remain calm and manage your emotions	Overreact or become upset
Practice active listening with good eye contact and open body language	Become defensive or argumentative
Summarize what you heard	Passively listen without responding to the feedback giver
Ask clarifying questions to seek understanding	Disengage from the feedback conversation
Actively engage in feedback conversations with confidence and curiosity	Silently disagree or pretend to agree
Thank the feedback giver	Ignore it and do nothing
Spend time thinking about the feedback	Refuse to take feedback
Evaluate the feedback slowly: Does it seem true? Is it something you already knew? Does the feedback giver have the expertise or credibility to make the observation? Have others said something similar?	Fail to take responsibility for next steps
Focus on what you can pull from the feedback to make a positive difference in your life and work	Believe you're a victim of feedback, unable to control the outcome
Decide if you're going to take the feedback. If not, explain why.	
Actively make attempts to incorporate the feedback and improve	
Be deliberate and mindful, looking for opportunities to stop doing undesired behaviors or start doing desired behaviors	
Set goals for improvement	
Practice receiving feedback	

Giving
Feedback

Why Giving Feedback Isn't Easy

With 1,600 people Googling "how to give feedback" each month, it's clear: Many struggle with giving feedback. In the last section, we examined why the feedback receiver can feel threatened by feedback. But why should the feedback giver feel uncomfortable? Why can giving feedback be just as painful as receiving it? In this section, we'll examine why giving feedback is difficult and often avoided.

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Your Brain

As we learned with the SCARF model earlier, in every interaction, our brain works to assess whether our sense of status is being threatened or rewarded. We're programed to care about our status.

When we give positive feedback and please the feedback receiver, our sense of status is rewarded. Alternately, when we give corrective or negative feedback, we risk displeasing the receiver. In short, most of us want to be liked, and being disliked is a blow to our ego.

SCARF Model
Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
Fairness
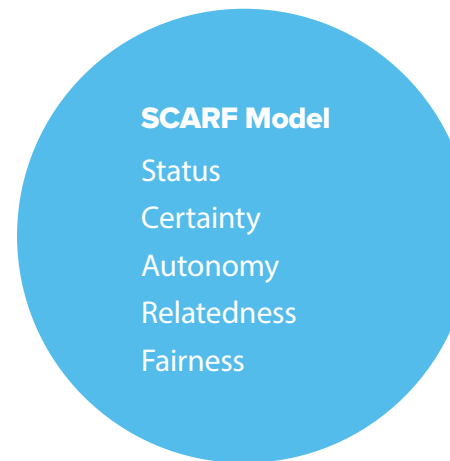
Your Fear

In any feedback interaction, the giver walks in with a degree of uncertainty. How will the receiver react? Will my feedback improve or worsen the behavior or situation? Will my feedback be taken the wrong way? Will it motivate or demotivate the receiver?

Giving feedback requires courage to overcome these fears.

Your Personality

Ph.D. and executive coach, Marcia Ruben discusses the relationship between personality and feedback in her article, "5 Reasons It's So Hard to Give Tough Performance Feedback." Using the Myers-Briggs personality assessment, Ruben points out that how we process information (thinking or feeling) plays a role in how we give feedback.

Thinking Style

If you exhibit the thinking style, you make decisions based on logic and analysis. You consider the problem first, while the people come in second. This process is rational and impartial. Feedback givers who prefer the thinking style are typically good at identifying flaws, while being oblivious to emotional cues. The result? The thinking feedback giver can leave the receiver feeling hurt without realizing it.

Feeling Style

If you exhibit the feeling style, you consider people first, deprioritizing the problem. You are more likely to provide positive feedback and appreciation and avoid giving a critique or corrective feedback. The result? The feeling feedback giver can over-empathize with the receiver or give them a false sense of accomplishment.

Your Lack of Know-How

Giving feedback is a skill, and an important one at that. However, it's a skill that's rarely developed. We don't know how to give feedback. We forget to give positive feedback. We avoid giving negative feedback. And it's not one-size-fits-all. What works changes from receiver to receiver and situation to situation.

The Receiver's Ego

Perhaps our biggest source of fear, and the main reason giving feedback is difficult, is that we don't want to hurt the receiver's feelings. In giving feedback, we know we can potentially make the receiver feel threatened by triggering the fight-or-flight response.

In a feedback interaction, the giver's every word and action is interpreted, magnified, and scrutinized for meaning the giver may have never intended. The SCARF model outlined in the previous section defines qualities that can activate a threat or reward response. (Refer to the earlier section for definitions and understanding of the receiver's reaction.)

Understanding the model can alert the feedback giver to the receiver's core concerns. With understanding, you can attempt to minimize the receiver's threat response and maximize the reward response. Let's examine how the feedback giver can minimize the threat of each quality.

SCARF Model

Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
Fairness

STATUS

To minimize threatening status, communicate that you value and believe in the receiver. Make it clear that your intent is to help the feedback receiver grow. Model the expectation that feedback is a reward, that growing and learning are highly valued. Most importantly, acknowledge successes. Receiving praise, mastering a new skill, receiving a promotion, and other successes increase perception of status and elicit a reward response.

CERTAINTY

To reduce uncertainty, provide clarity. Why are you giving the feedback? What are your expectations? What does the feedback mean? Communicate clearly. Give the feedback receiver the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Be transparent. Help the receiver find a path by breaking complex projects into small steps that are more consumable.

AUTONOMY

To reduce threat to a receiver's autonomy, ask questions to help the receiver self-evaluate and identify habits to build. Attempt to let them come to conclusions on their own. Give the receiver options and the freedom to choose. When giving feedback on how to do work, such as processes or guidelines, explain why. Focus on and point out the areas in which the receiver has greater autonomy.

RELATEDNESS

Before giving corrective feedback to someone, build a relationship of trust. This takes time and repeated social interactions. Seek to develop a sense of "sameness," a sense that you are part of the same group.

FAIRNESS

First, be certain that the feedback you're giving is fair. Check your biases. Are you playing favorites? To reduce a threat response, share information in a timely manner. Transparency can also provide a sense of fairness.

SCARF Model

Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
Fairness

One final note: Let go of what you can't control. You can only do so much. In the end, the receiver is responsible for their reaction.

The Do's & Don'ts of Giving Feedback

Giving feedback isn't easy, but here are a few tips that can help you out!

DO		DON'T
Acknowledge giving feedback is painful but essential	Be specific: Define specific behaviors to improve	Give only positive or only negative feedback
Understand that receiving feedback is difficult too	Make your expectations for performance clear	Turn the feedback receiver into a villain
Recognize no one is perfect	Stick to facts	Allow ego, fear, or personality prevent you from giving feedback
View both positive and corrective feedback as a gift	Be tough but not mean	Try to prove who is right and who is wrong
Understand threat responses to feedback and how you can minimize threat	Describe outcomes: What was the result of the behavior, positive and negative?	Overreact or become upset
Build trust and create a safe environment for feedback	Focus on the future: What does this look like moving forward?	Become argumentative
Prepare for feedback: Write key talking points and prepare questions to ask	Help set goals for improvement	Talk too much
Give feedback with the intent to help the receiver grow and improve	Help make a roadmap: A path of small, concrete actions	Be insincere in giving positive feedback
Be immediate and timely	Provide or find information that can help the receiver improve	Only focus on mistakes
Remain calm and manage your emotions	Ask what you can do to help	Give feedback to just provide information
Practice active listening with good eye contact and open body language	Find balance among the types of feedback you give: appreciation, coaching, and evaluation	Assume what works for you will work for others
Ask questions: Help the receiver self-evaluate to make connections about performance and identify new habits to build	Practice giving feedback	Inundate the receiver with your point of view and stories
	Encourage or schedule regular feedback conversations	Focus on the past
	Encourage dialogue about progress	Stockpile negative feedback
	Be willing to receive feedback	Vent
	End on a positive note	Email negative or corrective feedback
		Have expectations the receiver cannot meet
		Discourage employees to come to you with problems
		Put employees in an environment where they can't get help from others

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Creating a Feedback Culture

Creating a culture that supports feedback can increase the effectiveness of your feedback givers and receivers. Here are four keys to creating a feedback culture:

1. Provide Training to Givers and Receivers

Both giving and receiving feedback are skills. What's more, they're skills that are rarely developed. To support feedback in your organization, provide training and resources to your employees.

For all employees:

- Show them videos or let them observe responses to feedback

- Train them on asking questions, seeking examples, and clarifying meaning and intent

- Help them understand their resistance to feedback

For effective managers and supervisors:

- Encourage them to openly seek feedback

- Train them on how to communicate feedback effectively

- Develop their skills in setting goals for employees and helping them achieve those goals

- Build their expertise and credibility to give useful feedback

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2. Set the Tone From the Top

Like any element that you want to make part of your organizational culture, it starts at the top. Receiving and giving feedback well must be modeled. Your leaders must hone these skills and set the example. They must ask for feedback (up and down the hierarchy and sideways) and visibly show that they receive feedback well. And they must do it, and do it again and again.

3. Communicate Expectations Around Feedback

If giving and receiving feedback well is a quality leadership seeks, it must be made clear. Communicate, and communicate often. Set organizational expectations around what feedback looks like in your organization: Who gives it? Who receives it? How often does it occur? How do we do it? What is the goal of feedback? Make feedback part of your processes and traditions, from onboarding and appraisals to everyday conversations.

4. Power Your Team With Feedback Tools

The right tools can make all the difference. Whether you choose to work with Quantum Workplace or someone else, a technology partner can power your team with tools that help facilitate feedback processes by giving employees an easy way to record notes from feedback sessions, conduct two-way feedback conversations, request 360 feedback, and give positive feedback via recognition.

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Get the Right Tools to Support Your Feedback Culture

From employee surveys and 360 feedback to one-on-one meetings and recognition, Quantum Workplace's Employee Feedback Platform fosters feedback loops throughout the entire employee experience.

Quantum Workplace's Feedback Platform will...

- Facilitate 360 feedback via scheduled feedback cycles or let employees request it at anytime

- Give you the option of supporting attributed or anonymous feedback or both

- Allow employees to add comments and questions on feedback to improve clarity

- Provide managers access to feedback on their direct reports

- Track one-on-one meetings, both impromptu or via an automated recurring schedule

- Customize meeting templates and feedback questions to fit your culture

- And so much more!

Talk to one of our feedback experts today to receive a free tour of Quantum Workplace's solution for continuous employee feedback.

[Learn More] [Schedule a Meeting]