How to give reinforcing feedback

Reinforcing feedback can help you communicate that a behavior you observe meets or exceeds your expectations, and that you want to see it continue. Much more than an emotional boost, reinforcing feedback can be a surprisingly powerful way to influence behavior change if you are able to catch someone correctly doing the behavior you want to change.

How often should you give reinforcing feedback? Studies have shown that while most managers think they give enough reinforcing feedback, most employees feel like they don't get enough. While there's no magic number, a rough rule of thumb is that you should give reinforcing feedback once per day per team member. It's almost impossible to give too much as long as it's genuine.

But be careful: most people can see right through disingenuous feedback. Don't praise something unless you actually like it and it's important.

For example, congratulating a team member for something trivial like having no spelling mistakes in an email might be perceived as insulting. But telling that same team member how you were able to answer the CEO's question during the Monday staff meeting because of that timely email can help reinforce why it's important to keep providing timely emails, as well as be a real pat on the back.

Key steps for giving reinforcing feedback

1. **Prepare thoroughly.**

   In advance, you should identify the specific behavior you want to reinforce. If you want to deliver reinforcing feedback on a report an employee wrote, ask yourself: What specifically did you like about it? Was it the content, the formatting, or perhaps the executive summary? If it was the executive summary, what about it worked so well? If you aren't specific, at best the feedback is meaningless. At worst, you might inadvertently reinforce a behavior you don't want to!

   You should also identify the specific impact of that behavior. This helps the recipient understand what you value, why they should continue doing this particular behavior, and the benefits of the behavior.

   In the case of delivering feedback on your employee's report, you could have identified the impact of the crisp executive summary — in this case, a client was able to quickly read and understand the executive summary before a key meeting, saving you time during the
meeting, which you then used to push forward a sale.

An advanced technique is to relate the specific impact to the recipient's individual motivations. If the employee who wrote the great report is interested in a promotion, you could try to find a way to show how the behavior will help the person reach that goal. This technique can be exceptionally effective, but don’t overstretch the story or it will come across as manipulative.

2. Pick a good time and location.

Feedback is most effective when it is given within one hour of the behavior. Waiting longer than a day will significantly reduce its impact as recollection becomes fuzzy.

Reinforcing feedback can be given either privately or publicly. A comfortable, quiet, private environment is always a safe bet for any type of feedback. Public feedback does have some advantages. Many people like it and it helps your team understand your expectations. However, public praise can make some people uncomfortable and it’s harder for the recipient to ask questions. So only do it publicly if you are sure it will go over well and consider following up to see if the person has any questions.

3. Start the discussion by asking for permission to give feedback.

This starts the discussion in a more open and non-threatening way, and if the recipient is under a tight deadline or emotionally on edge it’s better to wait to give the feedback later when he or she can calmly focus on it. If the person says “no,” try to schedule a time with them later in the day. You can open the conversation by saying something like “Bryan, do you have a few minutes? I’d like to share some feedback with you on the marketing report.”

4. State clearly the specific behavior and its impact.

Be clear, direct and straightforward to reduce the chance of a misunderstanding. Don’t sugar coat or underplay your message. It’s helpful to use the phrase “I noticed that ...” when describing the behavior and the phrase “its impact was ...” when describing the results.

See 10 examples of how to give more powerful positive feedback for ideas to phrase your feedback for desired effect.

5. Listen carefully and react.

It’s almost impossible to predict how the recipient will respond to your statement, so you must listen carefully to try to determine what he or she heard and how the person feels about it. There are three common responses you are likely to hear:
Accepting praise. For example, you might hear: “Thanks, I really spent a lot of time simplifying the executive summary and it's nice to hear that it helped you in the meeting.” Ideally the recipient indicates that she heard and understood both the specific behavior and the impact. If you aren’t sure, you can ask clarifying questions to confirm her understanding.

Deflecting praise. If this happens, you should help the recipient take credit by acknowledging the deflection and pointing out his or her individual contribution and reiterating the impact. If the employee says, “Thanks, but that was Carl's idea to rewrite the executive summary,” you can reply that while Carl may have helped, it was the employee's decision to go ahead with the rewrite and he should take some credit for the benefits.

Becoming withdrawn, insincere, or negative. This usually indicates there is a deeper issue at play. For example, if the employee says, “That was a rough report, and it’s a miracle it even turned out halfway decent,” then you should ask open-ended questions to try to identify what’s behind the reaction. Maybe the person worked all weekend on the report and interprets your praise as an indication that he or she should put in those kind of hours regularly. Discuss and address any deeper issues before returning to the reinforcing feedback.

6. Thank the recipient.

At the end of the discussion, it's helpful to say “Thank you” and, if appropriate, give a genuine statement of encouragement. This will help ease any lingering tension and ends the discussion on a warm note.

Congratulations, you've successfully delivered reinforcing feedback! But it's not the only type of feedback. There's also a similar step-by-step process for giving redirecting feedback, which is typically tougher to do.

Next: How to give redirecting feedback