Giving and receiving feedback - role play exercise

Justin O'Brien

Acknowledgement in memorial

I would like to acknowledge the contribution to this paper provided by Lorraine Farnan (nee O’Brien) who passed away this year, far too early. Lorraine, in her British Airways Human Resources role headed up the Lancaster University Executive Global MBA programme I studied on, and together we ideated the role play training that sits at the core of this paper, which was partly inspired by her own O’Brien family’s smelly feet.

Introduction

Drawing inspiration from one element of a management development programme at a large, international airline the author had helped co-design, this role play exercise was utilised in its current form as part of an experiential, two-week long MBA professional development skills induction programme. It was designed to help accelerate the formation of strong ties amongst a group of international, post-experience business school Master’s students. However, it was later also successfully deployed as an ice breaker/team building exercise for the School of Management’s group of Undergraduate Student Ambassadors, who were employed part-time during applicant visit and open days to represent the department. It might also be deployed as part of a personal tutoring or career development programme, or even within a vocationally oriented management and leadership module.

The session is designed to encourage extensive student participation, and much of the 60 to 90 minutes required to successfully run this intervention should see students working in pairs or discussing their reflections in small groups. This exercise requires no prior preparation from students, and the concise role play scenarios are simultaneously both succinct and sufficiently rich, the material can be quickly absorbed and embodied in a relatively short period of time.

In an increasingly competitive environment where students often identify feedback as the lowest rated satisfaction measure (see: Ferguson, 2011; Canning, 2018), this instructional guide provides university tutors with an additional, rich tool that has been shown, over many iterations, to help develop important soft skills (Ritter, Small, Mortimer & Doll, 2018).

Learning Outcomes

After this intervention, students should be able to:

- Confidently make an active, oral contribution during class
- Reflect on their own (role play) behaviour with a peer
- Operationalise the fundamentals of giving and receiving effective feedback
- Through immersive experiential learning and reflection, understand the importance of gaining trust and facilitating active listening
- Appreciate the altruistic nature of feedback, the importance of using specific examples and to be confident in asking for feedback more often

Lesson plan

[2 mins]: Overview of session

[5 mins]: To plenary:

“What do we think about feedback?” [wait for students to break the ice here, do not rush onto the subsequent questions]

“Do you like receiving feedback?”

“What about giving feedback – is it easy or hard?”

“How do you feel when you’ve had disappointing feedback?”

“Can you tell me about a time when you acted on difficult feedback and it really made a difference?”

Give the group feedback on their performance, role modelling the feedback sandwich model – sugar coated buns, developmental meat – with specific examples from the plenary discussion.
[5-10 mins]: Introduction to giving and receiving feedback, three key points; (1) act of kindness, (2) continuous improvement, (3) impression given of not asking for feedback. Discuss the concept of fight or flight – in particular response to unsolicited negative feedback. Emphasise importance of source credibility and the need to regularly solicit feedback. Introduce the Johari Window (South, 2007) and highlight the blind spot danger area. Explain the anatomy of the feedback sandwich. [Add a bit of fun by badly drawing a burger on a white board, with sesame seed embellishment dots.] Emphasise that University should be a safe place for learning – by making mistakes. Reprise key points.

[7-10 mins]: Encourage students to form pairs (odd one out can form a three, or the instructor can role play).

“On the instructor’s signal, you will be invited to ‘perform’ the first role play, role play ONE. Each brief has two roles for you, one where you are the line manager, the other you are the subordinate.”

“There are five minutes reading time to prepare first.”

Distribute/allocate role plays –

“Together each pair should have one brief A and one brief B (two roles on separate A4 sheets). Read only the brief assigned to you.”

“Role play ONE has Sal as the line manager to Sam (top of the page). Confirm in your pair that you know who is Sal and who is Sam.”

“Take 5 minutes to read and prepare for role play ONE only at this stage.”

[Encourage discussion with other students in the same role if there is ample time

“Sal should make notes before commencing.”

[5-7 mins]: Launch the role playing.

“Preparation time is over.”

“Please now imagine that you are in a comfortable and reasonably intimate space, where no one can overhear you.”

“You have about 5 to 7 minutes to perform the role play ONE.”

“Once you have finished, silently reflect on the conversation you have just had.”

[5 mins]: Encourage reflection.

“In your pairs, please reflect on your conversation. How did you feel at key points?”

[5-15 mins]: Plenary discussion:

“What did you learn?”

“What was difficult?”

“What did you enjoy?”

“How realistic did this situation feel?”

“How was the second role play compared with the first?”

“Why was it different?”

[3 mins]: Emphasise the learning outcomes for the intervention. Give the group feedback on their performance role modelling the feedback sandwich model – sugar coated buns, meat – with specific examples from the discussion.

Teaching Reflections

Although the burger bun or sandwich feedback model (Docheff, 1990) is widely used in industry (e.g. Glover, 2000), it does not always receive a positive reception in academia (see illustrative examples: Henley & DiGennaro Reed, 2015; Von Bergen, Bressler & Campbell, 2014; Boud & Molloy, 2012). The simplistic mechanic can become a cliché, and there is some danger that managers and/or subordinates may not take the feedback exercise seriously.

If the line manager is merely seen to be running the feedback process for the sake of it and not really committed to offer genuine developmental support to their subordinates (e.g. by rushing the process, coming across as disinterested, moving the meeting to accommodate other priorities, being badly prepared or disorganised, not having evidence of specific situations to hand, not asking for and listening to feedback themselves) then the process is likely to lack integrity and effectiveness.
It is important that the feedback encounter does not feel like a cookie cutter exercise, and with experience over time managers and supervisors will develop their own style for running these conversations that will likely be tuned into the subordinate’s preferences and experience.

Additional Teaching Resources


References


Appendix 1

Role play scenario <Brief A>

Playing Sal, Sam’s line manager: Role Play ONE - Giving feedback

You are Sal, customer service supervisor responsible for managing the performance of a team of front line staff who primarily sell mobile telecommunications. The team also handles general service queries and complaints at a High Street retail outlet, over the telephone and online. The team of eight comprise four full time staff and four part-timers, who are often students working weekend shifts.

Sal is keen to improve feedback provision to the team. He has recently been introduced to a feedback sequence to improve feedback delivery. He is clear that this needs to be applied consistently to all members of the team.

Sal asks a member of the team to feedback on their latest performance.

DO NOT REVEAL THE FOLLOWING UNLESS YOU FEEL GENUINELY COMFORTABLE/.TRUST THE PERSON GIVING FEEDBACK. A family member has alcohol issues. You struggle to cope with people who have intoxicated themselves.

Role play scenario <Brief B>

Playing Sam: Role Play TWO - Receiving feedback

You are Sam. You work part time on the weekends and holidays in a mobile phone retail outlet. You are young and quite new to sales and working in a retail sales environment. You knew relatively little about telephones before commencing work. You have previous customer service experience working in a fast food restaurant from a young age. You are quite shy and have not previously had a performance review with your shop manager, Sal, before. You enjoy working as part of the team, although a few of your innovations have not been more widely adopted by colleagues.

DO NOT REVEAL THE FOLLOWING UNLESS YOU FEEL GENUINELY COMFORTABLE/.TRUST THE PERSON GIVING FEEDBACK.

You are having problems at home and have had to crash overnight with friends unexpectedly quite a lot.
Appendix 2: Burger Bun Feedback briefing/presentation notes

Giving and Receiving Feedback

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Why use Feedback?
An act of kindness, not punishment

• Never make the mistake of giving your feedback in the heat of the moment, it is unlikely to be balanced or constructive. You may say something(s) you later regret.

Why use Feedback? [2]
Continuous improvement

• Used effectively, feedback offers a positive reinforcement of good behaviours:
  — Show personal awareness
  — Ask for feedback
  — Be seen to act on feedback
  — Go to (1) again

Why use Feedback? [3]
Not asking for feedback means?

• You do not care about what others think?
• Believe yourself superior to others?
• You are perfect in every way?
Build Self-Awareness
Often at interviews you will be asked a (disguised) question about personal awareness:
“What are your strengths & weaknesses?”
“Can you tell me about a time when....?”
“What will you achieve in your first 100 days?”
“What are your development needs?”
“Describe your management style?”

University: safe place for learning
• Students are given some tolerance as they use their degree experience as a chance to experiment and mature; a process that often involves making mistakes and learning from them

University is a GREAT, safe place to trial giving and receiving feedback

Fight-or-Flight?
• It is likely that you are familiar with the fight or flight instincts, that invoke powerful responses to danger.
• To be effective (or merely vaguely useful) the feedback process needs to avoid both of these primal reactions. In both situation’s it is likely that any messages put across will be firmly REJECTED.

Rejecting the Source of feedback
• Someone you do not like, do not have respect for, does not like you, wants only bad things to happen to you, cannot realistically offer helpful feedback.

https://pixabay.com/images/id-1239198/em, as well as building confidence from successes.
Effective Feedback components:

• TRUST the persons integrity and the process itself
• BE SAFE and UNTHREATENING away from the crowd
• CONFIDENTIAL conversations stay behind closed doors
• FACTUAL use specific examples (notes)
• OBJECTIVE avoid heightened emotional situations

The feedback sandwich

• Remember to start the process with open ears, positive body language and a warm heart. You are helping someone develop, not off-loading your own pent up emotional frustration.
• Choose a suitable location, that is private and where you will not be disturbed. Turn off your phone and tablet. Avoid the bosses office.

The Feedback Sandwich

BUN

MEAT

BUN

BUN: Break the ice, build rapport

• Use three positive, specific examples
• Avoid generalizing, it lacks credibility
• Honestly reaffirm positives
• Use strong examples (from notes)

MEAT: key for change

• Difficult topics, use an inverted opening “How are you finding....??”
• Be factual, avoid opinion or feelings
• Be succinct. Give examples.
BUN: Close on a positive

• Be real. Be authentic. More examples.
• Invite comments genuinely (don’t yawn!)

• End on a HIGH.

Watch your blind spot
• Learning to drive we all learnt about that zone where even cleverly placed mirrors cannot cover. We are taught to turn our heads to avoid missing something in the ‘blind spot’.

The Johari window is a practical 2x2 framework that helps us remember that we really do not know everything, and reinforces the need for feedback.

Blind spot: Remember to turn your head

Remember
• It is difficult to give constructive feedback effectively
• Most people value your help
• No one wants to mess up because of a ‘blind spot’
• Experience makes the process much easier
• Practice makes perfect (...continuous evolution towards nirvana)
• Try to walk out smiling