

# Reinforcing Feedback

Commend desirable behaviors quickly to encourage their continuation

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller



**E**ffective feedback is crucial to the success of everyone in a school. Without feedback, people don't know how they are doing relative to expectations. This lack of awareness can cause communication problems, negatively impact employee motivation and morale, and cause conflicts when performance issues have to be addressed. Feedback is "the breakfast of champions" for an organization, and a key element in the success of a school.

In one of NAESP's 2018 surveys of new principals, 79 percent reported that feedback can be difficult to provide, because people can get caught up in the emotions that sometimes accompany the "judging" of another person. On the other hand, employees report that feedback is one of the most crucial elements leaders can provide to help them stay motivated and improve performance. What can good leaders do to help them overcome the discomfort of providing

feedback while taking advantage of this powerful motivational tool? Let's look at several ideas.

In *Score to Soar: Moving Teachers From Evaluation to Professional Growth*, we focus heavily on feedback and its role in professional development. "One way supervisors can make a huge difference in the learning of their teachers is through the supervision process," we wrote. "This process should provide employees with information that helps them continue to maintain their effective skills and also refine areas of their teaching to keep their practices current."

## Two Types of Feedback

In our work with educators, we have identified two major types of feedback: reinforcing and developmental. While each is designed with a specific purpose in mind, they contain several common elements. Because of the importance of these two conference

types, we will focus solely on the reinforcing process in this article. In our next installment in *Principal*, we'll focus on the developmental conferencing process.

The major purposes of reinforcing feedback are to provide people with information about their effective behaviors or performances, and to strengthen or increase the probability of these behaviors. In order for this strengthening to happen, there are several elements that feedback needs to include. Here's a list of those aspects:

- **Specific:** Describe the behavior or performance that was desired or positive.
- **Sincere:** Be sincere in your feedback, and make sure it is something significant.
- **Immediate:** Reinforcement should come as soon after the behavior/performance as possible.
- **Rationale:** Why was the behavior/performance effective?
- **Encouragement:** Recommend continued use of the behavior/performance.

Several components within this process are essential to the effectiveness of the feedback. Let's explore a few.

**Specificity.** For feedback to be effective, the person receiving it needs to get specific information about what made the performance, behavior, or act effective. This is best accomplished by providing specific information, descriptions, or examples. In *Score to Soar*, we present two models to guide specificity: the "police officer" approach and the "novel author" approach.

In both models, the focus is on providing feedback describing observable, describable, and specific behaviors. For example, when a police officer reports, she focuses on specific descriptions rather than vague or opinionated information. This behavior provides a clear description of the incident or situation.

We advocate using a similar process when providing feedback to teachers and other employees. By being specific, you provide the person receiving the feedback with the exact behavior that prompted the feedback. Since they hear exactly what made the performance effective, they know what to do in the future in order to receive additional reinforcing feedback.

**Timing.** The timing of the reinforcing feedback is another crucial element for its success. The closer the feedback is to the event, the greater the chance that the employee will see it as helpful and repeat the effective performance. The level of immediacy is relative to the experience. Some principals are able to provide a few specific comments immediately after an observation, while others take time to gather their thoughts and share them within a couple of days. Whatever the timing, sooner is better.

**Rationale.** Understanding what made the performance effective is a key element in strengthening the employee performance or behavior. For teachers, the most motivating rationale statements typically highlight student impacts. A rationale such as, “I noticed that when you provided the signal for attention, all eyes were on you. The students were ready to listen and learn” provides the teacher with a direct effect and helps them feel their efforts had a positive impact. Simple, straightforward rationales have a huge impact on the motivation of the teacher.

**Providing encouragement.** A simple statement letting the person know you encourage them to continue to implement the behaviors or acts you observed creates a powerful impact by reinforcing their position. A statement such as, “This is something I’d like to see you continue to use as you

teach future lessons” lets them know you approve, and it is a simple but powerful way to subtly set expectations for future performances.

**Ensuring the other person understands the feedback.** End the feedback session by making sure the person understands the main points of the conversation. Without verification of what was discussed, we don’t know what the teacher or employee has taken from the conversation, even though we might think the message was clear. By posing questions such as, “What did you learn in this conversation?” or “Share with me what you did that was effective, and tell me how you plan to continue to use those strategies in the future,” and truly listening to the responses, helps us understand what the employee absorbed.

#### Next Steps in the Feedback Process

With practice, you can internalize the elements presented in this article as part of your everyday practice. In the short

term, many principals find it helpful to write out a script for their reinforcing conversations and conferences so they can concentrate on elements such as eye contact, body language, and other elements of communication. Once your employees become accustomed to receiving reinforcing feedback, they can use it with students to help them learn what they did well.

Reinforcing effective behaviors is easy; in the next article, we’ll focus on a more difficult task: providing the employee with feedback about improving performance through a developmental conference. **P**

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