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Practice Innovations: The #1 feedback tool for leaders to have in their toolbox

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28 Mar 2023 · 7 minute read

The ability to provide constructive, useful, and timely feedback to legal team members is one of the most important attributes a legal leader can possess

Law firm leaders are saddled with honing one of the most important and difficult management skills related to the supervision and development of their attorneys and business professionals: providing constructive feedback.

Feedback is a leader's tool to improve performance in team members no matter what role they have within the firm. The objective in giving feedback is to enhance performance by supplying information to guide the person towards the level and quality of work which management expects of them.

There are many different levels of feedback that could be given, just as there are many different types of team members who would benefit from a certain type of feedback. Too often leaders fail to determine if they are providing the appropriate level of feedback to a particular individual. For example, it may be enough to tell Paula to "improve her writing" but Paula may not understand what exactly needs to be "improved" — is it the grammar, style, or the content?

Occasionally the leader falls into the trap of providing feedback that's too general, which may leave the receiver unable to determine what needs to be improved or changed. Words like *better*, *improve*, *correct* and *change* often are too ambiguous to use when giving feedback. On the other hand, if the feedback is too specific, some individuals may feel insulted. A leader needs to take the individual's personality and readiness for specific feedback into consideration when offering constructive criticism.

To best fit the appropriate type of feedback to the person, the leader needs to take into account the individual, the task, and the leader's previous experience with the person. The leader may have identified a problem or error to the team member and only later learned it was not corrected because the team member needed more specific direction in how to correct or improve the situation.

It is important to verify that recipients has received the constructive feedback by asking them to validate their understanding of what was communicated, such as having them paraphrase what they heard. Doing this prevents miscommunication and avoids potential future frustration.

5 types of feedback

The following are five types of feedback that are usually utilized most often:

1. **Problem identification** — This type of feedback is used when the leader is confident the person can improve, once the person realizes something is wrong. The leader identifies what needs correction and leaves it up to the individual to choose the action or solution necessary. *Example: "Jonathan, your financial report does not include the totals for the month of September."*
2. **Corrective recommendations** — This type of feedback is used when the recipient needs some specific suggestions or a plan of action to correct the problem. Giving recommendations for what needs to be fixed or improved is the fastest way to have a work product improve, but it can lead to the person relying on others for continuous guidance. *Example: "Jonathan, your financial report does not include the totals for September. Perhaps you should pull the file, review the totals, and include those figures."*
3. **Joint problem-solving** — This is the most effective, yet time consuming type of feedback. Leaders should use this when there is a need to develop self-confidence in the individual. Meeting with the person and using a joint problem-solving approach will allow time to discuss the issue in detail while facilitating an exchange of ideas. Instruct the individual to formulate an action plan with sufficient follow up. *Example: "Jonathan, your financial report does not include the totals for September. Let's discuss what needs to be included in these reports and where you can find this information."*
4. **Demonstrations or examples** — Demonstrations often are the equivalent of on-the-job training. Examples can be simple or very complex and are used when the skill or knowledge level of the person makes it unlikely that they will be able to follow suggestions or recommendations without guidance. *Example: "Jonathan, your financial report does not include the totals for September. Let me show you what a final report should look like and how to determine if all the necessary figures are included."*
5. **Training** — This type of feedback is used when it is necessary to develop skills and knowledge in others. Training is not a matter of negotiation; once it is decided that this is what the individual needs, then arrange it as soon as possible. *Example: "Jonathan, your financial report does not include*

the totals for September. I've made arrangements for you to sit with Bob in accounting so he can teach you how to complete these reports."

Guidelines for giving feedback

Constructive criticism should be presented in a way so that the receiver perceives the feedback as useful and beneficial *without* being judgmental. If given correctly, those working with the leader will know where they are and where to go next in terms of expectations and goals. The following are five common mistakes leaders make when providing feedback, along with examples of *poor* and *good* interactions.

Avoid insults

Poor: *"What's your problem? Can't you ever remember to write down the facts when we explain the situation?"*

Good: *"Sally, remember to bring your computer so you can take notes at the client meeting."*

Avoid conflicting messages

Poor: *"Barbara, I've received some complaints about missing deadlines. You really need to get your work done. Oh, by the way, the presentation you did was excellent."*

Good: *"Barbara, I've received some complaints about missing deadlines. If you communicate with others about your workload, we might be better able to get you the proper assistance."*

Avoid overload

Poor: *"Edward, you have to meet our deadlines, and you need to proofread your work more carefully. I have also heard that you are rushing the other team members by not scheduling your work ahead of time."*

Good: *"Edward, you have to meet our client's deadlines. Do you have any ideas on how you can work more efficiently within our time frames?"*

Avoid ambiguity

Poor: *"Derrick, you need to handle last minute requests better."*

Good: *"When you get last minute requests, please talk to me about prioritizing your current workload."*

Avoid non-directed comments

Poor: *“Some of you are sending too many individual text messages when a detailed e-mail would be more time efficient for the other team members.”*

Good: *“Jonathan and Sally, you are sending too many individual text messages when a detailed e-mail would be more time efficient for the other team members.”*

It is imperative that feedback be given in a way that will improve work as well as maintain or bolster the team member’s self-esteem. Avoiding arguments and confrontations during the feedback session will help maintain constructive relationships and build up the recipient’s morale.

As a leader, it is important to focus on the work product or behavior and not the person. For feedback to be effective, focus the communication on modifying a situation, correcting a behavior, or improving work quality. There should never be statements made that can be interpreted as an attack on character or personality.

After the feedback is clearly communicated, summarize and express support. This should be viewed as a positive experience for both parties — the leader and the team member.

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