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## The Coaching Feedback Model

One of the most common workplace challenges we are asked to help managers with is the art of providing feedback which is constructive, and so which will not demotivate reports and teams.

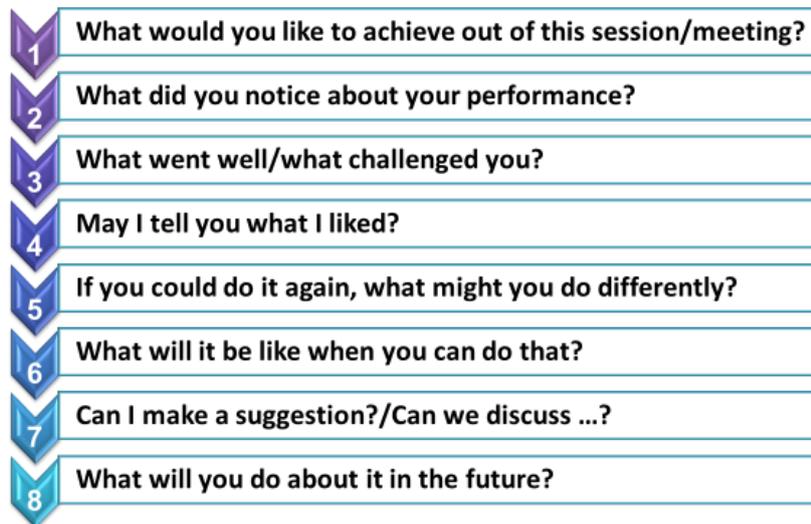
People rarely take into account that it is the overall relationship that a manager has with reports that will dictate the way any kind of feedback is received. If there is a high level of trust in the relationship, feedback will be welcomed as a supportive measure to be learned from. If the trust is low, any suggestions for improvement are likely to be resented or rejected.

The key to building trust in a relationship is to take a coaching approach: asking instead of telling, seeing people's strengths more than their limitations, treating staff with respect and, in general, engaging emotional intelligence. Where trust is currently low, even if a manager learns the coaching approach, it will take some time to build the levels of trust required for feedback to be valued.

However, there is what might be called a short-term 'magic bullet' called "Coaching Feedback". The most effective feedback people can receive is the feedback they give themselves. Our Coaching Feedback model provides a framework for conversations which will encourage people not only to examine their challenges and shortcomings, but also to identify their strengths and achievements, and plan a constructive way forwards.

Coaching Feedback means asking people to give themselves feedback instead of, or before, giving one's own. It applies both to positive feedback and what has come to be termed 'learning' or 'improvement' feedback (rather than 'negative feedback').

This technique would apply to a conversation about an action, a project, behaviour, a staff appraisal, or any situation where people are being asked to reflect on their personal performance. The questions below are guidelines to a series of areas to be explored, and can be modified to suit a particular context, culture, or style of communication:



The significance of each question lies in its purpose, rather than in the actual words used. Most of the questions are not chronological and can be mixed into a different order, although it is always useful to start with a future focused question and end with a plan of action. Let us now explore each question one by one:

### 1. What would you like to achieve out of this session/meeting?

It is usually effective to start any undertaking by looking ahead to what all parties want to achieve before setting out. This focuses people's minds and highlights any differences or misunderstandings in terms of intention. Looking to the future has a side benefit of raising energy and clarity of purpose.

### 2. What did you notice about your performance?

Asking 'What did you think about your performance?' invites judgement, which tends to put people on the defensive. 'What did you notice?' is a neutral question requesting information rather than assessment. This can be rephrased to suit the context of the situation, and explored with several questions, such as:

- *What was your experience of that?*
- *What is happening at the moment?*
- *What have you done so far?*
- *Would you like to tell me where you are with this?*

### 3. What went well/what challenged you?

Even if a neutral question is asked at (2) above, people tend to answer by describing what went wrong. It is important that people recognise their strengths as much as their weaknesses.

Less frequently, people talk only about what is going well in reply to (2), and in those cases I would ask a question based on 'What are your challenges?'

Alternative questions are:

- *What are your strengths?*
- *What are you enjoying about this?*
- *What difficulties are you experiencing?*

- *What have you achieved so far?*
- *What does knowing that you can do that tell you about yourself?*
- *Where else could you apply this?*

Another scenario is where people reply by talking about why the failures were all someone else's fault. In this case I would make the questions more personal:

- *What was your own contribution to the success/failure of the project?*
- *What might you personally have done differently that would have produced a different result?*

#### 4. May I tell you what I liked?

As we saw in the previous paragraph, people tend to dwell on what went wrong, while minimising their achievements. Have you ever walked away from an event where your performance was impeccable except for one small flaw – perhaps you forgot to cover a point or got something mixed up? These are the things which can stay with us for days, blotting out what we did well.

This element of the process represents an opportunity to give positive feedback, provided it is authentic, and to ensure that people appreciate their own strengths. This could happen anywhere in the conversation and as often as deserved:

- *It sounds like you have made real headway there*
- *Are people responding differently now you are doing that?*
- *I've been noticing a new confidence in your team recently.*

#### 5. If you could do it again, what would you do differently?

This can be explored at length and asked several times. Each answer might benefit from being explored through GROW questions:

- *And where are you with that now?*
- *Where would you like to be?*
- *What is getting in the way?*
- *How might you change this?*
- *How will you do that?*
- *What else would you do differently?*

The intention of this question is to look to the future, so it is in effect a Goal question in terms of GROW. The beneficial effect of this future focus can be intensified by the next question:

#### 6. What will it be like when you can do that?

This is an extremely important part of the process. It directs the person's thoughts to the future, bypassing obstacles that may be obscuring their vision. This area can usefully be explored at length, using questions like:

- *Imagine you have achieved it – what do you see/hear/feel?*
- *What are the benefits?*
- *How does it impact others?*

Help the person to place themselves in their future and gain a real experience of how it feels. A recognised technique used by top golfers is to imagine hitting the winning shot, hearing the roar of the crowd etc. This type of visioning creates new neural pathways in the brain, in the same way as new habits do. In this respect, the brain is unable to distinguish between fact and fiction – which is why we cry at

sad films – and will believe that the victory is already achieved, making it much easier to do the process in real life.

This raises energy, motivation and confidence. It is more likely to improve personal performance than analysing what went wrong.

### 7. Can I make a suggestion / can we discuss?

Depending upon the context of the conversation, this is an opportunity for the coach or coaching manager to offer any advice or to deliver any 'learning' feedback that needs to be given. With any luck, the person will already have come up with their own learning feedback, negating the need to deliver it at all. Notice that this question is placed near the end of the list. People perform best when they are in control of their own ideas and pace, so once they have said all they want to say, they will be more receptive to input from others.

Alternatives to this question might be:

- *Would it help to hear something from my own experience?*
- *Could we discuss the feedback we have received from your customers?*
  
- *Could I share with you what is coming up for me here?*
- *I have an idea that might help. Would you like to hear it?*

Notice that all the above questions are prefaced by asking permission. This helps people to relax and think more clearly in sensitive situations, because they feel a greater sense of control. It creates a healthy boundary between the coach's agenda and the coachee's.

### 8. What will you do about it in the future?

Finally we embark upon the 'Options' and 'Will' (actions) part of GROW, to tie down reflections and ideas into a solid pathway forward. If this is attempted too soon, without a thorough exploration of the present situation and the future, people will tend to remain 'stuck' and not know how to resolve their dilemmas or change their behaviour. Other questions might be:

- *What could you do about that?*
- *What would you advise someone else in your position to do?*
- *How/when/where/with whom will you do that?*
- *How committed are you to that course of action?*

The GROW model, upon which coaching feedback is based, is reproduced below:



The elements of the GROW model above do not have to be chronological and can be mixed throughout a conversation, although it is usually most effective to spend the greatest part of the time exploring Goal and Reality.

The key to the whole process of coaching feedback is that people give themselves the feedback first, and for most of the conversation. This is more effective than being given feedback by someone else, because they will own it, deliver it in a way that will least jar or upset them, and will feel more enthusiastic about making changes.

When people are managed in this way on a regular basis, a culture is created where individuals take greater responsibility for their own performance, decisions and self-improvement.

In a wider sense, if you are a manager who wants to motivate and get the best possible performance out of your team, there are three important questions to ask yourself before opening your mouth at all:

1. Do I need to tell this person what they have done wrong?
2. Are they aware of it and keen to put it right?
3. Will they perform better if I praise them for their strengths and leave them to get on with it?

Most of the time, people are aware of their shortcomings and trying to change. Boosting their confidence is often the fastest route to helping them do just that. Where you recognise you that you truly can offer some information or advice that may help, ask permission, as in "Can I suggest something that worked for me?" as we explored in Question (7) above.

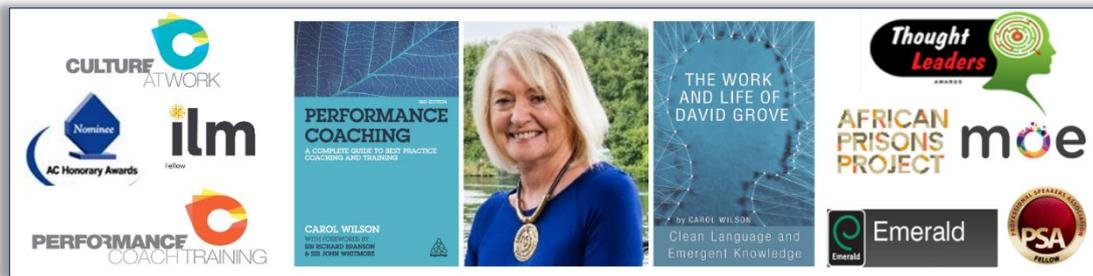
Sir Richard Branson, with whom I worked at board level at Virgin, is a master at coaching feedback:

*"Right across the business we have a philosophy of encouragement. Our people are rarely criticised. If someone makes a howling mistake,*

*usually they don't need to be told. They know. People have a fear of failure, and while this is perfectly reasonable, it's also very odd. Because it seems to me that it's through making mistakes that we learn how to do things. Watch a musician practise sometime. Watch a baby figure out how to walk. Listen to a toddler speak. Skills like walking and talking and playing music emerge gradually, steadily, from a blizzard of (often pretty funny) mistakes. I think this is true of everything – that learning is about making mistakes and learning from them.*

*“Business Stripped Bare” – Sir Richard Branson*

## About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.