

The psychology behind better workplace feedback (15 surprising facts)

I've been writing a lot on feedback recently (See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for some of my recent feedback thinking). One of the reasons for my recent focus on feedback is because it's such a simple yet powerful tool for improving performance. As I've been quoted saying previously: "feedback is probably the most cost effective performance management tool available".

Delivering great feedback is cheap, easy to learn, and there's no shortage of [expert advice](#) out there on how to do it well. But still nearly [65% of employees want more feedback](#) than they're currently getting. So it's clear that there's still a lot of room for improvement.

As a result I've been digging through some of the recent research on workplace feedback for practical insights. The piece that follows below isn't a beginners guide to feedback ([see here for the 101 guide to giving better feedback](#)), but what I've done here is highlight a range of facts on workplace feedback. These are interesting discussion points that you can use to get your managers engaged in a broader discussion about just how powerful feedback can be.

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I hope you enjoy reading these 15 feedback facts as much as I enjoyed pulling them together - I'd love to hear which facts have got you thinking in the comments

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1. There's no such thing as valuable feedback from someone you don't trust

When receiving feedback, employees don't separate the content of feedback from the person delivering it. In other words, there's no such thing as valuable feedback from someone that you don't trust.

Before any feedback will be effective, the recipient must see you as a credible source of development advice. Critically, the person you're giving feedback to must believe you have their interests at heart. If not, your feedback won't be effective in driving behavioural change - no matter how well intentioned.

Read more: [American Psychological Association](#)

2. Struggling employees already realise that they have a problem

It's easy to think that the role of negative feedback is to educate your employees on issues that haven't come to their attention. But most of the time, that's just not the case. In a study of nearly 4000 people who had just received constructive feedback, 74% of respondents indicated that they already knew about the problem and were not surprised to get negative feedback.

Most often, it's not that employees aren't aware of the issue - it's that they don't know how to respond. So just pointing out that they have a problem isn't enough to be helpful. To improve performance, constructive feedback

must go one step further and provide specific feedback around potential causes and solutions.

Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

3. The more you listen, the better employees think you are at giving feedback

If you want to give great feedback, the most important thing you can do is listen.

This is somewhat counter-intuitive: Many people typically about the feedback conversation as an almost one-way discussion where the manager provides advice and guidance.

But as the data shows (see below), more time spent listening has a strong payoff. The more you listen to employee views before giving feedback, the better the employee experiences and understands the feedback. It's all about making sure employees understand and agree with the basis of the feedback, and buy into the course of action.



Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

4. Most employees prefer corrective feedback to praise and recognition

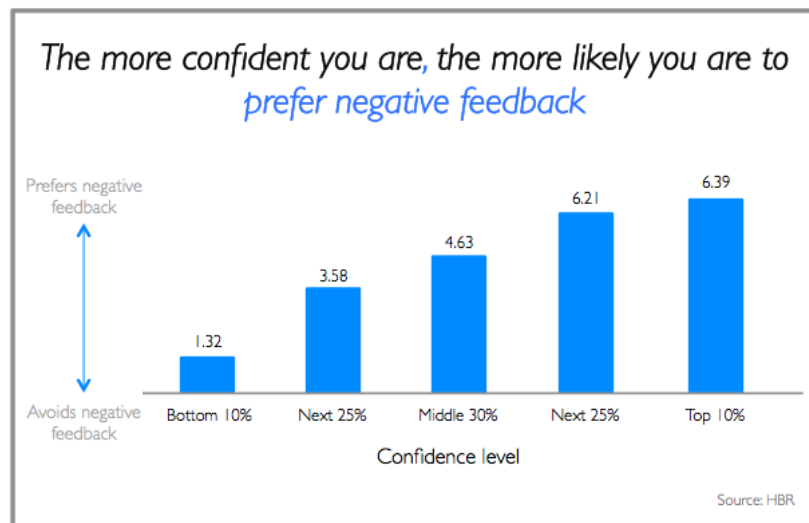
A majority of employees prefer corrective feedback to

praise and recognition. In this survey of 900 global employees, 57% of respondents stated that they prefer corrective (negative/constructive) feedback, whilst only 43% stated that they prefer praise or recognition.

Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

5. The more confident you are, the more likely it is you prefer negative feedback

Interestingly, the more confident you are, the more likely it is that you prefer corrective feedback. As clearly shown in the graphic below, confident individuals are more likely to prefer corrective feedback relative to positive praise or recognition.

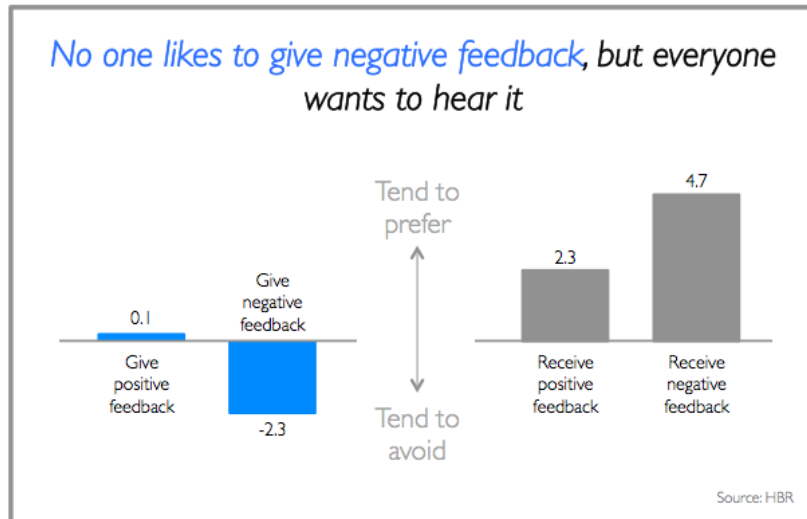


Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

6. Almost everyone loves receiving feedback, but hates giving it

It turns out that most people like getting feedback a lot more than they like giving it.

As shown in the visual below, most employees love receiving feedback (especially of the constructive variety). However, the same employees tend to dislike giving feedback (again, more specifically negative feedback).

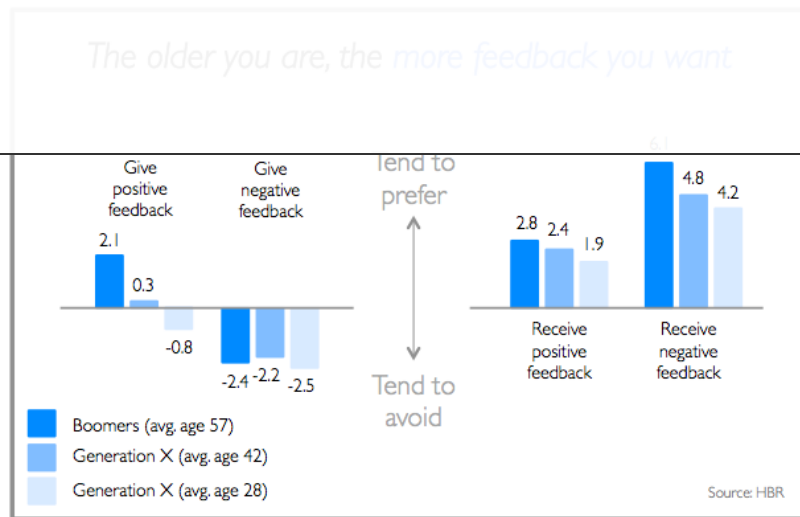


Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

7. Older workers want more feedback than younger generations

Older workers have a preference for both more positive and negative feedback than younger generations. As shown below, older generations were also much more likely to give positive feedback.

Whilst this is interesting and provides a strong counterpoint to the [millennial feedback myth](#), it's worth noting that the research didn't control for rank or role – so some of this effect is likely to be explained by seniority.



Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

8. Star performers need extra affirmation after setbacks

Recent research from London Business School shows that star performers need more positive affirmation after setbacks.

Researchers looked at the performance of top talent after they've had a major setback that involves loss of status. The findings show that when previously high performers lose status, their performance suffers. And the very best performers suffer the most. The mediocre performers, by contrast, barely suffer at all.

The research also shows that it was possible to mitigate the effects of this performance drop with targeted affirmation. The academics suggest that this reinforces just how important it is to give your star a break after they've bungled something or lost face. As a manager, you have a critical role here in helping your star performer regain status by letting them know how you value their work.

Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

9. Positive feedback should praise effort, not ability

When giving positive feedback, it's important to praise **effort** rather than **ability**.

Stanford psychology Carol Dweck has showed that focusing individual praise on talent rather than effort leads to poor performance. In a number of studies, Dweck has showed that praising individuals for their natural talent leads to increased risk aversion and those individuals exhibiting being more disturbed by setbacks.

This contrasts with individuals who are consistently praised for their effort (rather than ability). These individuals are more likely to build determination and resilience, leading to better performance over the long term.

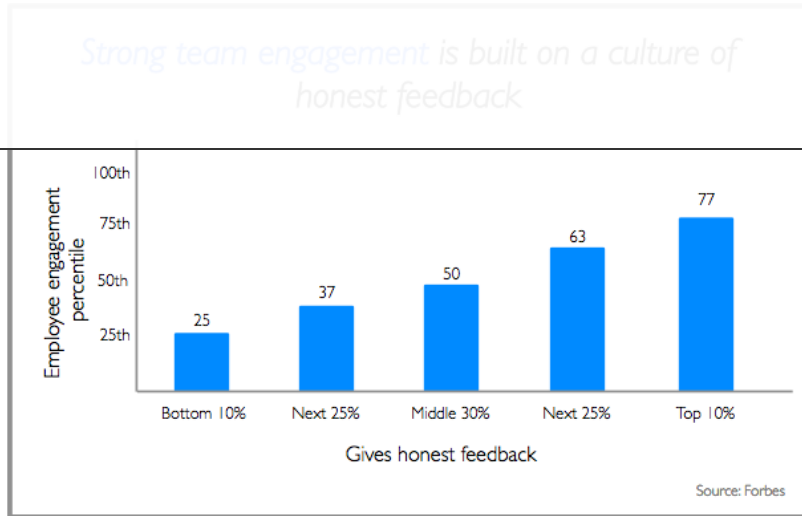
Read more: [Harvard Business Review](#)

10. Strong team engagement is built on a culture of honest feedback

This recent study of over twenty thousand leaders showed that strong team engagement is built on honest feedback.

In the study, leaders ranking in the bottom 10% of feedback givers saw team engagement scores that averaged just 25 percent.

In contrast, those leaders in the top 10% for feedback giving saw team engagement scores average 77 percent.

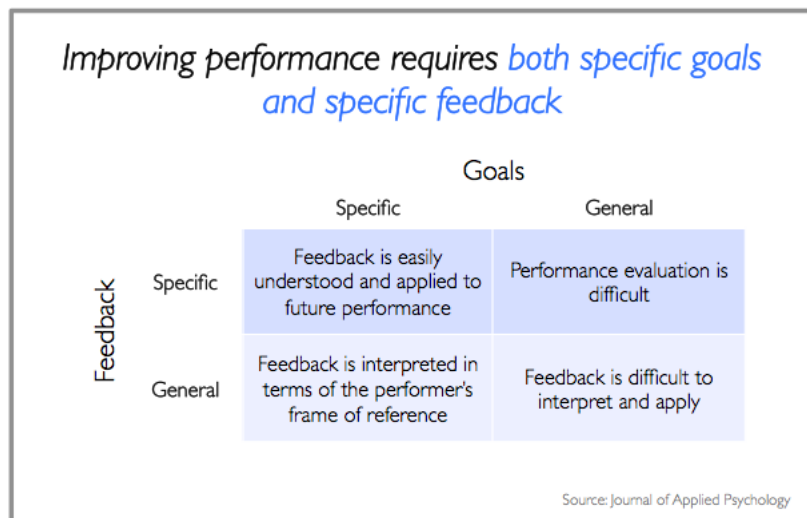


Read more: [Forbes](#)

11. Improving performance requires both specific goals and specific feedback

Most of us know from our own work experience that specific feedback is significantly more helpful in improving long-term performance (compared to general platitudes).

But it turns out that specific feedback isn't helpful unless you have specific goals as a frame of reference (see the visual below for easy explanation).



Read more: [Journal of Applied Psychology](#)

12. To improve effort, focus on relative feedback

Fascinatingly, the most motivating kind of feedback is finding out you're just behind someone else. It's most motivating knowing that you have the chance to 'win' (but aren't currently doing so).

As the researchers in this study stated: "Managers trying to encourage employees to work harder, for example, might provide feedback about how a person is doing relative to a slightly better performer,' they said. 'Strategically scheduling breaks when someone is behind should also help focus people on the deficit and subsequently increase effort. This should lead to stronger performance and ultimately success.'"

Read more: [BPS Digest](#)

13. Following-up feedback is critical for improving performance

This research study showed the power of following up feedback in improving long-term performance.

With 252 managers over 5 years, researchers found that: "Managers who met with direct reports to discuss their upward feedback improved more than other managers, and managers improved more in years when they discussed the previous year's feedback with direct reports than in years when they did not discuss the previous year's feedback with direct reports. "

Significantly, it seems that the more action you take to follow-up and truly understand feedback, the larger the performance improvement.

Read more: Personnel Psychology

14. Withholding negative feedback is really about protecting yourself (not the recipient)

The reason you withhold feedback isn't to protect the recipient, it's to protect yourself.

In this research study led by Carla Jeffries, researchers tested how the content of feedback changed based on the medium of delivery (face to face or anonymous) and the self-esteem of the person giving feedback.

As the researchers described: "The findings provided strong evidence that we mostly withhold negative feedback to protect ourselves, not to protect the person we're judging. If people's motives were selfless then arguably the feedback provided should have been just as positive regardless of how it was delivered. In fact, students in the face-to-face condition provided the most positive feedback"

Read more: [BPS Digest](#)

15. The more you ask for feedback, the more effective you are as a leader

Leaders who ask for feedback are significantly more effective. In this study of leadership effectiveness across 51,896 managers, there was a strong correlation between the tendency to seek feedback and leadership effectiveness.

The survey results showed:

- *Leaders in the bottom 10% of asking for feedback were also rated in the lowest 15th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness.*

- *Leaders in the top 10% in asking for feedback were rated in average in the top 14% for leadership effectiveness.*

Read more: [Forbes](#)

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