



This is the post-peer reviewed version of the following article:

**Feedforward or feedback – reframing positive performance management**

Bridget, R. (2017). Feedforward or feedback – reframing positive performance management. *Human Resource Management International Digest*, 25(5), 7-9.

DOI of the final copy of this article: 10.1108/HRMID-04-2017-0060

Downloaded from [e-publications@UNE](mailto:e-publications@UNE) the institutional research repository of the University of New England at Armidale, NSW Australia.

## Feedforward or Feedback – reframing positive performance management

Traditional feedback processes, for many organisations the basis of performance appraisal (PA), are increasingly under question. When Accenture<sup>1</sup> announced in 2015 that it was abandoning traditional annual performance reviews for its more than 300,000 employees, many other organisations paused to ask how they promoted great performance in organisations and if they should also be doing things differently.

There is increasing evidence that backward looking PA processes simply do not work. In a recent review, Budworth, Latham and Manroop (2016) assemble the negative evidence to indict traditional PA: negative PA interviews lead to job dissatisfaction, a large proportion of staff are dissatisfied with PA (even those who are rated positively), PA is often seen as political and biased and thus unfair and negative PA tends to create a defensiveness and ‘deficit’ mentality, diminishing motivation rather than turning things around positively for an employee and her or his organisation.

There are other compelling reasons why traditional, backward looking PA systems are being abandoned. In a knowledge economy looking at how things worked (or failed) in the past will tell us little about how to succeed in the future. Especially for organisations confronting rapid and uncertain change, traditional PA risks reinforcing old ways of operating that will leave organisations at the mercy of nimble and forward looking competitors.

A recently proposed alternative to backward-looking PA (feedback) is feedforward (Kluger and Nir, 2010). As the same suggests, feedforward does not dwell on past outcomes, rather it focuses positively on the future. Rather than dwelling on failures from the past, *feedforward* focuses on recent success stories from an organisation or an individual that will allow a plan to be developed that will support improved personal and organisational performance in the future.

Feedforward draws upon the *positive psychology* movement, a paradigm that is increasingly influential in HRM and other areas of management. At its core, *positive psychology* inverts the notion that deviance from expectations is a bad thing by focusing not on *negative* deviance, but on *positive* deviance.

Positive psychology, it is argued, may have profound direct and indirect benefits for individuals and their organisations and social systems. In management, it has its roots in the old debates between scientific approaches most associated with Henry Ford and Fredrick Winslow Taylor and the humanist movement best associated with Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm. In essence, the focus on the human as an emotional and social being allows for a focus on human *flourishing*. There is a focus on the important behavioural outcomes available to people and their organisations when they are in a positive frame of mind rather than a negative one.

Budworth et al. (2016: 47) notes that such approaches draw upon a belief that “eliciting stories of success can assist in the identification of conditions that could support future high performance”.

What would feedforward look like in practice?

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OALeB1aS18](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OALeB1aS18)

- The format of the traditional PA interview can be used, but instead of matching past outcomes to previously-defined goals, the first step will be to ask the employee to identify occasions of successful performance. Identifying this success story will allow a deeper discussion of those organisational and personal elements supporting this success, generating new insights for the future. Further, telling these stories allows for their context to be explored – what were the elements that supported this outcome and how did this positive experience make the employee and her or his team feel?
- The mentor or manager would then turn the conversation to shared gains in the situation being discussed. How did the employee and the organisation both benefit from this success? How did this situation of success for the individual employee also lift his or her team? Looking beyond the outcome, what were the successful processes that supported this outstanding success? Such a discussion reinforces the potential for win-win outcomes – a core element of any positive relationship.
- In the interview, active listening is important. Active listening focuses on win-win outcomes and avoids preconceived negative assessments of past performance. This shift in tone from traditional PA approaches is of fundamental importance in changing the atmosphere of the interview, potentially from one of negativity and pessimism to one of optimism and even inspiration.
- Finally, the interviewee is asked to identify any gap between her or his goals and the current situation. Again, the gap here is framed as an opportunity for positive improvement rather than a negative situation worthy of punishment. Such an approach draws on the powerful force of *cognitive discrepancy*. This motivates goal setting and the necessary behavioural change for individual performance that will push forward an individual's behaviour towards their better or ideal self.

At its heart, feedforward creates the opportunity for positive self-discovery that negative PA simply ignores. It creates positive and optimistic conversations that clearly have the tenor of improvement, but it also drives the conversation towards a focus on the practicalities of what drives great performance in the future. In doing this, it facilitates and enables this very improved performance.

So what does the evidence say about this approach? Budworth et al.'s (2016) paper provides some strong evidence that employees provided with feedforward do in fact perform better than those subject to more traditional PA arrangements four months later. An important part of this outcome is the elimination of some of the more negative elements of PA discussed earlier. By 'designing out' the potential bias and perceived politicisation of traditional PA, employees feel that they are being treated more fairly and this enhances the other positive elements of feedforward in setting employees up for a better and more positive future self at work.

Transitioning to a feedforward approach may well be challenging for some organisations. In many respects it needs to replace, rather than simply be added to, traditional PA arrangements. Adding a positive *feedforward* postscript to a negative traditional PA interview would potentially confuse and annoy employees. Moreover, the loss of the fairness element would tend to suppress any positive outcomes available.

Nonetheless, moving towards positive discussions and positive, forward-looking employment relationships seems clearly the way of the future. Like any interpersonal relationship, the negative

outcomes of dwelling on the past while forgetting to plan for a positive future will surely reinforce a downward relational spiral. This is something no organisation can wish for – especially when such a positive alternative exists.

#### Comment

This review is based on “Looking forward to performance improvement: a field test of the feedforward interview for performance management” by Budworth et al. (2016).

#### References

Budworth, M.-H., G. P. Latham, and L. Manroop (2015) “Looking forward to performance improvement: a field test of the feedforward interview for performance management”. *Human Resource Management*, 54, 1, 45–54.

Kluger, A. and Nir, D. (2010) “The feedforward interview”, *Human Resource Management Review*, 20, 235–246.