

## Chapter 6

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### Engagement and Feedback

**In this chapter you will learn the following about engagement and feedback:**

- What is engagement, benefits, barriers and enablers
- What is feedback
- Benefits of giving, receiving and seeking feedback

#### 6.1 What is engagement?

Engagement is an organisation wide approach, practice or belief which creates an environment for constructive feedback and supports greater identification with and involvement in an organisation's purpose. Government sponsored research<sup>1</sup> into the nature, benefits, barriers and enablers was carried out in the UK in 2011 and concluded that:

*“Engagement is about creating opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers and wider organisation. It is also about creating an environment where employees are motivated to want to connect with their work and really care about doing a good job.”*

*“Employees who work for engaging organisations get an organisation they feel proud to work for; managers who are more likely to listen and care for them; leaders who listen to and inspire them; more opportunities for personal growth and teams that support each other”.*

The research also found that:

- **People management practices were a better predictor** of company performance than strategy, technology, research and development.
- Higher levels of engagement are associated with **better outcomes in public organisations**.
- Engagement **enables an adult two-way relationship** between leaders and managers, and employees, where challenges can be met, goals achieved, whether it be **improved patient care**, higher quality production, or more satisfied customers.

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<sup>1</sup> Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement. A report to Government by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke, November 2011.

The research identified barriers to and enablers for engagement:

**Barriers to engagement:**

- Engagement is **not seen as important** - people know what is expected of them and should get on with it.
- Managers and organisational culture; inconsistent management style, **lack of communications and knowledge sharing**, low visibility of management i.e. office bound.
- An **obsession with targets** often infects managers' behaviour and **detracts from their ability to interact effectively** with their staff. Prof J Oliver, Northern Leadership Academy 2009

**Enablers for engagement:**

- Leadership **engage employee emotionally** by providing a clearly expressed story about what the **purpose of the organisation** is, why it has the vision it has, and **how the individual contributes** to that purpose. Engaging on the rational level is not sufficient.
- **Managers who invest time**, offer clarity, appreciation, positive feedback and coaching
- Behaviours are consistent with stated **values**

See Appendix 5 – CIPD Employment Engagement Management Competency Framework

## **6.2 Feedback**

Engagement it is made real and personal to individuals through the quality and frequency of feedback received and the opportunity to seek and give feedback.. In an organisation feedback is generally understood as an opinion or information given to a person by another person on an activity, action or piece of work. The importance of feedback as a process for enhancing performance cannot be overestimated as feedback has a positive effect on individual, group and organisational performance. The lessons from studies on feedback conclude that:

- as individuals we like to know how we are performing
- seeking, giving and receiving feedback are integral to building and maintaining healthy professional working relationships
- to be effective feedback must be an ongoing activity
- the proactive and positive use of feedback are core to good management
- seeking, giving and receiving feedback can be improved by practice

### 6.2.1 Benefits of seeking, giving and receiving feedback

- builds and maintains healthy professional relationships
- generates meaningful discussions
- establishes a shared understanding about standards of performance and achievement
- reduces uncertainty about what is to be achieved and how it is to be achieved
- communicates wider organisational requirements
- is a process by which good performance is identified and underperformance can be addressed in a supportive and structured way

### 6.2.2 Providing Feedback

To be effective, feedback should be:

**Honest:** Employees cannot maintain or improve good performance or change unacceptable performance if they do not receive accurate and honest feedback. “Sugar-coating” negative feedback may create more serious problems in the long run. While it’s important to be honest, it’s equally important to put some thought into how best to deliver the feedback so that the person receiving it accepts it as being fair, constructive and based on evidence / facts.

**Focused:** Feedback must relate to performance or behaviour and not personality. Likewise, if feedback evaluates the person (e.g. “You’re too aggressive”), rather than describing some aspect of their behaviour and its impact on others / the task at hand, the employee will probably become defensive, and be left with no clear idea of how to improve their performance.

**Specific:** It is important that feedback is factual and based on specific behaviours / evidence / facts / observations. Factual feedback:

- describes what was expected
- cites examples of how the employee’s performance met / exceeded / failed to meet expectations
- describes how you knew the employee had done well and what additional strengths/qualities helped them to deliver
- points out the benefit / consequences of their performance i.e. its impact on the achievement of individual and / or organizational objectives
- Allows person to make contribution and offer solutions

- Where there has been a gap in performance, outlines what improvement would help delivery in the future and discuss how this might be achieved

If feedback is too general (e.g., “You’re just going to have to work a little harder”) employees will not know what to do to maintain or enhance their performance.

**Helpful:** For feedback to be successful, receivers should feel that they can:

- volunteer their ideas and opinions
- discuss problems and express personal feelings freely in a non-threatening environment
- recognise their performance shortcomings
- discuss their job performance objectively
- accept suggestions and forward direction

**Balanced:** Providing balanced feedback means:

- giving feedback on a regular basis
- giving feedback when something is done right, rather than waiting until things go wrong
- avoiding information overload – giving too much feedback at one time, particularly when it’s negative

**Timely:** Feedback should be given as close as possible to the timing of the event that it concerns. Delayed feedback conveys the message that the performance (whether good or bad) wasn’t very important.

**An 'X Factor' illustration  
the impact on the individual when feedback lacks honesty....**

*Jim finishes singing and much to his surprise, disappointment and disbelief the judge says "stick with the day job, you cannot sing". Why did this happen? This happened because, for years, Jim received "kind" feedback from his family on his non-existent talent. The judge gave honest (if brutal) feedback from his family and friends on his non-existent talent. The judge gave honest (if brutal) feedback. If Jim had received honest feedback prior to this he would not have found himself in this embarrassing situation.*

### **6.2.3 Feedback - What is the learning from other organisations?**

The points below were sourced from a discussion forum on 'LinkedIn' that focussed on feedback in the context of performance management:

- *"NOT giving feedback -- positive or constructive. Too many managers simply ignore this need of their employees for feedback".*
- *"Only giving feedback once a year. The annual performance appraisal has become a crutch and an excuse to delay the giving of feedback. Such delay removes the feedback (again, either positive or negative) from the event needing or deserving it, which means the employee won't connect the information with the event as powerfully as they would have done if the feedback had been given in a more timely manner".*
- *"Only giving positive OR negative feedback. We all want to know when we're doing something well (so we can keep on doing it) and when we're doing poorly (so we can correct it)".*
- *"The "keep doing what you are doing" is not the correct way to give positive feedback. I once had an outstanding leader and I enjoyed getting feedback from him. His approach was simple: "Keep doing" / "Quit doing" / "Start doing".*

[Gallup research](#) found one simple factor – ‘**direct manager style**’ – can profoundly impact employee engagement. To summarize:

- Managers who focus on employee strengths have 61% engaged employees and 1% actively disengaged
- Managers who focus on employee weaknesses have 45% engaged employees and 22% actively disengaged
- Managers who ignore their employees have 2% engaged employees and 40% actively disengaged

### 6.2.4 Influences on decisions to accept and use feedback

People react to feedback in different ways. It's important that we take time to reflect on how best to deliver feedback so that it's taken on board by the person receiving it. There are a number of influences that impact on a person's decision to 'accept' feedback and these are detailed below.

#### External Influences

- The nature of the feedback (positive / negative)
- Feedback credibility - its accuracy, the source of the feedback and whether or not it is considered to be evidence – based / factual / honest
- Feedback specificity – if feedback is perceived to be vague it has a smaller chance of having the desired impact
- Consistency with that from other sources (remember the 'X Factor' illustration!)

#### Internal influences

- Self-perception of performance – where an individual's perception of their own performance differs from that of the Line Manager it may reflect a difference in understanding in relation to objectives / expectations / standards required. The best thing to do here is to have an honest discussion about the event that relates to the feedback with a view to establishing a shared understanding of what is expected and how performance can improve as a result.
- Emotions – it's important that feedback focuses on the performance and behaviours of the individual against agreed objectives, not on the individual themselves. Some people will take feedback very personally so it's important that the line manager manages the

meeting appropriately to ensure that the person leaves the room with a renewed confidence and determination to develop and grow in their role.

- Beliefs and abilities regarding change. How people receive and act on feedback will depend on their perceived ability to change; their knowing and understanding exactly what it is they need to change; their ability to plan for change and their ability to implement change. The Line Manager should support the individual in working through this process to ensure optimum development.

The key steps in deciding on whether to accept/use feedback are detailed below:

- Initial Reaction
- Reflection and internal processing of emotion and content
- Decision to accept and act, or not
- Action for learning

Try to identify patterns in your reaction to feedback and note any adverse or unhelpful reactions. For example, if you always act defensively to negative feedback, you might miss excellent opportunities to improve yourself.

- High engagement organisations **score better on risk management** than those with low engagement
- Engagement levels can be **predictors of sickness absence** – engaged employees 2.7 days v's disengaged employees 6.2 days  
Gallup (2006)