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## [The art \(and science\) of giving good feedback](#)

By Mary Ellen Slayter on, September 20, 2010

Feedback is more than just useful — it's *essential*. It's hard to get motivated, and *impossible* to stay motivated, when you aren't sure if you are on the right track. So giving well-crafted, frequent feedback is one of the most important responsibilities of any leader or manager.

Here's the problem: As you are no doubt well aware, much of the feedback that managers give isn't all that motivating. Even with the best intentions, feedback can easily backfire, and many of us have a hard time understanding why.

What you may be surprised to learn is that scientific studies of motivation have identified clear, principled reasons why some types of feedback work and others don't. It is neither mysterious nor random. If you've gotten it wrong in the past (and who hasn't?), then you can do a better job giving feedback from now on by sticking to a few simple rules:

- **Rule #1:** When things go wrong, **keep it real**. It's not easy to tell someone that he screwed up, knowing it will cause him anxiety, disappointment or embarrassment. But don't make the mistake of protecting your employee's feelings at the expense of the truth, because without honest feedback he can't possibly improve. And never take away an employee's sense of responsibility for what went wrong (assuming he is in fact to blame), just because you don't want to be "hard" on him. Letting him off the hook for his own mistake will rob him of a sense of personal control over his own work. Nothing is more de-motivating than feeling powerless.
- **Rule #2:** When things go wrong, **fight employee self-doubt**. He needs to believe that success is within reach, regardless of the mistakes he has made in the past. To do this,
  - **Be specific.** What needs improvement, and what exactly can be done to improve? When you are a manager, helping your employee figure out how to do it *right* is just as important as letting them know what they are doing *wrong*.
  - **Emphasize actions that he has the power to change.** Talk about aspects of his performance that are under his control, like the time and effort he put into a project, or the strategic approach he used.

- ***Avoid praising effort when it didn't pay off.*** Many managers try to console employees by saying things like “Well Bob, you fell short of your sales goal, but you worked hard and really tried your best.” Why does anyone think that this is *comforting*? For the record — it’s not. (Unless, of course, it was a no-win situation from the start). Studies show that being complimented for “effort” after a failure not only makes people feel stupid, but also leaves them feeling incapable of reaching their goal. In these instances, it’s really best to stick to *purely informational* feedback — if effort isn’t the problem, figure out what is, and let your employee know.
- **Rule #3:** When things go *right*, **avoid praising ability**. I know we all like to hear how smart and talented we are, and so naturally we assume that it’s what our employees want to hear too. Of course they do. But it’s not what they *need* to hear to stay motivated. Studies show that when we are praised for having high ability, it leaves us vulnerable to self-doubt when we encounter difficulty. If being successful means you are “a natural,” then it’s easy to conclude when you’re having a hard time that you just don’t have what it takes. Instead, **praise aspects of your employee’s performance that were under his control**. Talk about his creative approach, his careful planning, his persistence and effort, his collaborative attitude. Praise the actions, not the person. That way, when he runs into trouble later on, he’ll remember what helped him to succeed in the past and put that knowledge to good use.