



PEOPLE PERFORMANCE



Feedback on feedback

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> Purpose

To give an overview of the feedback received by feedback givers, to test findings against research and to propose measures to enhance personal effectiveness during feedback.

> Methodology

- Conducted 8 semi structured interviews with experienced feedback givers.
- Integrated their views and opinions to identify trends and patterns.
- Compare these findings with similar and other research findings on feedback.
- Formulate measures that can enhance the personal effectiveness of feedback givers.

> General observations

- It is something experienced by all!
- No differences between experience levels of feedback givers, gender and age of the feedback givers.
- No differences on the type of feedback, e.g. selection or development.

> Finding 1: Impact of allocated scores



During “Bad news” feedbacks most feedback givers experience less of a personal impact and more resistance by the candidates.

Bad news feedbacks in general are more challenging to conduct as a result of:

- Bad news candidates have lower potential, with a lower level of understanding the feedback;
- They are shocked about the news;
- They need some time to work through the information.

> Finding 1: Impact of allocated scores

A study in 1997 by Francis-Smythe and Smith titled **The psychological impact of Assessment in a Development centre*** on 32 candidates in a UK financial services provider found that:

- The position/role the participant is assessed for in relation to current position/role will have a direct impact on the **acceptance of the outcome**;
- The outcome have an impact on the candidate's **commitment and involvement** towards what is happening next. Candidates with a good outcome tend to be more motivated to participate in following-up activities, reviews, programs;
- The **quality of feedback** will also help the candidate in accepting the overall outcome.

*Francis-Smythe, J. & Smith, P. M. 1997. The Psychological impact of Assessment in a development centre. *Human Relations*, 50(20), p149

> Finding 1: Impact of allocated scores

How to manage this challenge?

- Understand the psychological reaction that a candidate may have;
- Be prepared to help the candidate to work through their emotions (Denial, anger; negotiate; depression, acceptance);
- Prepare for the feedback session – where is the candidate now in relation to the position/role assessed for; what is the outcome; be sure of your facts and information;
- Discuss concrete measures and plans to ensure further commitment and actions;
- Think differently about a “bad news” feedback than a “good news” feedback;
- Feedback starts at the DC.

> Finding 2: How realistic is the DC

Feedback givers said that there is a link between the position/role, the assessment exercises and the assessment outcome:

- The more realistic the exercises and assessments and aligned to the position/role, the easier it will be for the candidates to accept the feedback.
- Candidates must understand DC methodology and how the total assessment is assembled;
- They must also understand the feedback process and how everything is related.

Addressing these points at the feedback session is too late

> Finding 2: How realistic is the DC

How to manage this challenge?

- Proper DC design based on in-depth job analysis and task sampling process – you must understand the position/role from a task, contextual and human attribute perspective;
- Based type of exercises on an Assessment matrix to ensure that the exercises measure the identified competencies. The exercise must be a realistic scenario for the position/role;
- Brief participants before the start of the assessment;
- Debrief after the assessment and create an understanding of the next steps;
- Spent enough time during the feedback session on the total assessment process.

> Finding 3: Forced vs. voluntary feedback

Feedback givers said that participants who are forced to receive feedback and who is not interested, are often negative and not open to any feedback.

Participants often say that they for example were not selected for this position and are therefore not interested.

Some of the feedback givers noted that people with lower levels of interpersonal skills, find the feedback sessions extremely uncomfortable and tend to keep quiet.

> Finding 3: Forced vs. voluntary feedback

Abraham, Morrison and Burnet* found in a 2006 study on Supervisors who attended a DC, that those that performed poorly, particular on interpersonal dimensions, were less likely to initiate a scheduled feedback telephone call.

This have to be understood from a feedback-seeking behaviour perspective:

- Monitoring – seeking or attending to environmental clues about performance;
- Inquiry – Asking other about own performance.

Participants may monitor during the DC that they have done poorly and will therefore not inquire feedback. Recent research showed that participants are less likely to ask for feedback if they think they have done poorly. Participants with lower interpersonal skills may prefer written reports and not interpersonal session.

*Abraham, J.D.; Morrison, J.D. and Burnett D.D. 2006. Feedback seeking among Development Centre participants. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 20(3), p 383

> Finding 3: Forced vs. voluntary feedback

How to manage this challenge?

- Accept that all participants don't necessarily want verbal feedback. They are happy to read and understand a written report;
- Some participants may feel embarrassed by their results, e.g. managers during internal assessments where their own HR consultants have to give feedback to them. Plan for such scenarios and don't force feedback givers onto someone;
- Feedback based on monitoring is often enough and participants will not always enquire more;
- Participants with lower levels of interpersonal skills will most probably be more withdrawn and levels of participation during a feedback session is not necessarily the only indicator of feedback acceptance.

> Finding 4: Impact of self ratings

According to the feedback givers, Participants who have no idea how they have done during the assessment often finds it difficult to accept the ratings during the feedback sessions.

If participants know the dimensions that will be assessed beforehand, they prepare themselves mentally better for the outcomes and are therefore more in agreement with the assessor's results.

Participants who have gone through a formal self-evaluation on the same competencies, have a "chopping block" on which the feedback can be based. The feedback is then not perceived as a one-sided discussion and flows better.

Those with high self-esteem are often stubborn and don't accept any feedback lower than their own perceptions.

> Finding 4: Impact of self ratings

Halman and Fletcher* did a study on correlations between self assessment scores pre and post a DC, and the ratings by the assessors. They found:

- There was an agreement on only 2 of the 10 dimensions based on the pre DC self ratings and assessor ratings. This increased to 6 based on the post DC self ratings;
- Females showed more self-assessment accuracy;
- Under raters became more accurate, while Over raters had self ratings significant higher than assessors. Their self-esteem remained unchanged.

They conclude that self-awareness increase for some but not all participants.

*Halman, F. and Fletcher, C. 2000. The impact of Development centre participation and the role of individual differences in changing self-assessments. *Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology*, 73, p423

> Finding 4: Impact of self ratings



How to manage this challenge?

- Use self ratings effectively – it can enhance understanding and acceptance of the results;
- Know that people will not always agree with your assessments. Expect it from the over raters and those who receive continuously good performance feedback ratings;
- If no self ratings are done prior to the DC, discuss the dimensions before you start the feedback sessions and ask the participants for a rating;
- Don't disagree with self ratings, but use it as a point of departure for the feedback

> Finding 5: Involving line

Feedback givers said that the involvement of line managers often add to the credibility and acceptance of the overall process, but

- This only works if line managers “knows their place”;
- Is properly trained and orientated;
- Is involved with all the phases of the DC;
- The data integration session is facilitated by the DC facilitator to ensure the qualitative aspect.

> Finding 5: Involving line

Johnston press, one of the UK's oldest and largest publishing groups, embarked on a DC approach for the managers in 2003. They did a 360 evaluation followed by a two day DC with detail feedback. The DC were facilitated by consultants with two line managers who act as co-observers.

“One thing I hadn't expected was how positive it would be to involve the senior line managers. Engaging them in the assessment aspect has significantly enhanced their commitment to the programme. They have also become much more familiar with the competencies and more supportive of the participants”.

> Finding 5: Involving line

How to manage this challenge?

- We are not the only people that can assess the behaviours of other people – line can do it also and they are doing it every day. They just have to understand what they have to look for.
- Our area of specialisation is to compile and facilitate the process and provide expert insights where needed.
- During feedbacks we can cleverly use them to handle the difficult participants through relating their behaviour to their real environment and elaborate through practical examples.
- They can't bluff their own line managers.

> Finding 6: It is all about numbers

Feedback givers said that in some cases mentioning and emphasizing scores, took away the development messages that should have gone through.

Our feedbacks tend to become a quantitative exercise while we should actually focus on the qualitative feedback that will enhance understanding and development.

We as DC practitioners are often forced by our companies and clients to give ratings and to put people in categories because that is often the only language understood by line and decision makers

> Finding 6: It is all about numbers

In a case study by John Arnold*, he found that:

- Participants who have received a high grade during the DC, did not necessarily have more positive perceptions about the DC process;
- Participants were more likely to value the DC for reasons related to their development;
- Assessors and line managers value the DC for reasons related to the grading.

Overall their findings support to some extent concerns about the incompatibility of grading and development. But the use of grading does not necessarily entirely negate the developmental value of a DC. Much depends on perceptions on how the grading is used.

*Arnold, J. 2002. Tensions between assessments, grading and development in Development centres: A case study. Int J of Human Resources Management, 13(6), p 975

> Finding 6: It is all about numbers

How to manage this challenge?

- What was the reason for the assessment – if it was for selection, grade people and forget about development. If it was for development, focus on the qualitative aspects of the feedbacks;
- Negotiate with your client for a more broader grading system, e.g use descriptions rather than scales;
- Remember your role as Assessor – if you have to grade, then do so. If not, be a coach. Even better, facilitate the process and promote self learning through self ratings and 360 assessments. Promote monitoring feedback enquiry behaviour.

> Finding 7: The culture of the organisation

Feedback givers mentioned frequently that a **Feedback culture** in an organisation is supportive of an environment to provide feedback in. In such a cultural participants often receive feedback and is general more appreciative of feedback. They see the value of personal development and shows high levels of feedback inquiry behaviour.

Giving feedback to participants who are in general open to feedback, almost never resulted in situations where the feedback giver is not making any impact. On the other side, it puts more pressure on the feedback giver as participants often challenge feedback received.

> Finding 7: The culture of the organisation

How to manage this challenge?

- Promote feedback culture as an integrated part of the assessment and development process;
- Guide the decision makers on the importance of a proper feedback culture and suggest ways to establish it (remember this will not be achieved overnight);
- If no feedback culture exists, adapt your feedback approach to accommodate participants who will have a resistance or for whom receiving feedback is something new.

> Conclusion

I have aimed to:

- Highlight that all feedback sessions will not always be a smooth ride. But if you are on a bumpy road, you are not alone;
- Although there are always things out of your control, you can critically evaluate the outcomes and search for reasons. As indicated, there will be in almost all cases a way to manage the challenges;
- Each Feedback giver has a unique style, but should always learn from other feedback givers;
- The answers are often in “Back to the basics”



Questions



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